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Accommodating the Interactional Dynamics of Conflict Management

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the ways that communication accommodation theory (CAT) can be a useful framework for understanding and diagnosing interactional issues in interpersonal and intergroup conflict situations. We argue that the theory's construct of *attuning strategies* provides a multidimensional view of mutual adjustment, leading to insights relevant to successful versus unsuccessful conflict management. We then connect this framework to work on improvisation and logics of exchange. Finally, we discuss how contextual variables suggested by CAT may impact the nature of communication in a conflict situation and, thus, the course that a conflict interaction may take.

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1. Introduction

Interactional work on conflict generally focuses on how parties interact and communicate as a conflict or negotiation plays out (Olekalns, Putnam, Weingart & Metcalf, 2008; Putnam, 2006a). Empirical work examining sequences of interaction and mutual influence in negotiation and conflict has established general patterns and sequences of behavior that result as participants react to each others' behaviors in these types of interactions (see Putnam, 2009; Roloff & Li, 2010). However, despite the highly *communicative* nature of the subject matter, work in this area draws primarily on conflict theories, in which communication is at best implicit and at worst absent.

Given the centrality of language and communication to an interactional approach to studying conflict, and indeed to conflict itself (e.g., Putnam, 2006b), communication theories have the potential to inform work in this area in important ways. Indeed, one of the primary goals of conflict management research, particularly that taking an interactional approach, is to better understand how and why certain interactions are successful as opposed to unsuccessful; that is, why some conflicts escalate while others resolve (Olekalns et al., 2008). Examining interactional dynamics has the potential to provide insights into where a conflict interaction goes "wrong"; this may, in turn, help scholars and practitioners better diagnose issues in future conflict situations and promote successful management of those conflicts. However, without a theoretical framework that specifically addresses communication, such work may be limited in its ability to understand and diagnose the dynamics of these interactions.

In this paper, we propose that communication accommodation theory (CAT: e.g., Giles, 2008a, b), a theory of mutual communicative adjustment that has been invoked across a

wide range of languages and cultures (Giles & Ogay, 2006), is a useful framework to invoke for understanding and diagnosing interactional issues in intergroup conflict and multi-party negotiations (Ayoko, Hartel, & Callan, 2002; Ellis, 2010; Huffaker, Swaab, & Diermeier, 2011). To this end, and after first reviewing conceptualizations of key ideas in the conflict literature, we introduce the theory's constructs of accommodation and nonaccommodation as a new lens through which to see and expand upon patterns and sequences of behavior in conflict interaction. We then discuss how CAT's construct of *attuning strategies* provides a multidimensional view of mutual adjustment, leading to insights relevant to successful versus unsuccessful conflict management. Next, we connect these to work on logics of exchange (McGinn & Keros, 2002), another way of conceptualizing mutual adjustment in conflict situations. Finally, we discuss how contextual variables that CAT suggests may impact the nature of communication in a conflict situation and, thus, the course that a conflict interaction may take.

2. Conflict Interactions

Conflict represents a unique type of interaction and communicative context at both the interpersonal (e.g., Roloff & Chiles, 2010; Sillars, 2010) and intergroup (e.g., Ellis, 2012; Ellis & Maoz, 2012) levels. Conflict may be defined as an expressed struggle over a perceived incompatibility of interests, values, beliefs, or goals by interdependent parties (Putnam, 2006b). The characteristics of struggle, perceived incompatibility, and interdependence set it apart from other types of communication in important ways. In conflict interactions, parties operate from a baseline of disagreement or difference, but neither party is able to resolve the incompatibility without the other. As such, conflict is characterized by a dialectic tension between cooperation and competition: while

parties having competing interests, their interdependence—and indeed, the fundamentally cooperative nature of communication more generally—requires some them to exhibit some level of cooperation in order to interact and manage the conflict.

In research on conflict, communication is typically treated either as a variable or a process (see Putnam, 2006b). In this paper, we take a *process* approach to communication and, thus, consider conflict to be constructed and constituted in interaction. This perspective proposes that when we interact with others, the way we respond to them affects how they respond to us; together, we co-construct the interaction, and the course that it takes.

Depending on participants' language and communicative choices, as well as their interpretation of the other party's behavior, participants may contribute to the escalation, maintenance, or resolution of a conflict. Empirical work focused on the interactional dynamics of conflict and their consequences has identified three sets of behavioral patterns in conflict interaction—*reciprocal*, *opposite*, and *complementary*—each with differing consequences for the conflict and, therefore, the participants (see again, Oleklans et al., 2008; Putnam, 2006b).

Reciprocal interactions are characterized by parties' matching each other's tactics directly. For example, one would respond to a threat with a threat, or information-sharing with information-sharing. This pattern of behavior tends to result in feedback loops or self-perpetuating cycles. When reciprocal behavior is cooperative—for example, both parties engaging in information-sharing or problem-solving—this can be a positive, productive approach to conflict. However, when reciprocal behavior is negative—for example, both parties threaten or make demands—this can result in escalation of the conflict, and may lead to negative conflict spirals.

Opposite (sometimes called transformational) interactions are defined by participants' using mismatched or opposite tactics, generally pairing cooperative moves with contentious moves. For example, one could respond to a demand by providing information. This sequence of behaviors can break the development of tightly bound, reciprocal patterns of interaction like those discussed above, for better or for worse, depending on the nature of the reciprocal behavior. This kind of behavioral pattern can be an antidote to escalation if it breaks a negative reciprocal cycle; however, it also has the potential to move parties from a positive reciprocal interaction into a less productive and potentially more contentious exchange.

Finally, complementary interactions are defined by parties' using a tactic that balances or complements a partner's tactic or response. In these cases, parties are generally aligned in their broad orientation (i.e., cooperative versus competitive) towards the conflict, but mismatched on their specific choice of behavior. For example, a bid for dominance might be met with submission. Generally, complementary moves break or prevent the escalation of conflict. When parties repeatedly engage in the same set of complementary behaviors over time, role specializations in the relationship may result (Oleklans et al., 2008).

Although this work in patterns and sequences clearly provides important insights into how certain interactional moves lead to the ways in which conflicts plays out—particularly with respect to outcomes like escalation or conflict spirals—it has some shortcomings. The categories outlined here are defined primarily by objective descriptions of behavior, and with this comes some limitations. First, the definitions of reciprocity, opposition, and complementarity are somewhat uni-dimensional, being essentially defined in terms of behavioral moves in interaction. However, it is possible, and indeed likely, that these constructs are in fact multidimensional—that

is, there may be multiple ways that individuals can reciprocate, oppose, or complement each other—and that these other dimensions may have important consequences for interaction. As such, the present definitions of these constructs could be seen as narrow, with the potential to benefit from expansion. Second, these constructs and definitions provide relatively little insight into what factors might motivate the enactment of one pattern as opposed to another, particularly with respect to social psychological or contextual variables and dynamics that may be at play in these interactions.

In what follows, we propose that considering these patterns of interaction, and indeed the interactional dynamics of conflict and negotiation more generally, through the lens of communication accommodation theory may help address these limitations.

3. Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication accommodation theory (CAT: Giles, Taylor, & Bouris, 1973; Giles & Powesland, 1975; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987) is an interpersonal and intergroup theory that seeks to explain the processes by which individuals adjust their behavior to further their social and communicative goals. It proposes that, in interaction, individuals may either make adjustments for each other in a way that facilitates the encounter through *accommodation* or they may regulate their communication in a way that does not facilitate the encounter by engaging in *nonaccommodation* (Giles & Gasiorek, in press). Each of these constructs may be seen from either the speaker or the listener's perspective: speakers choose to either accommodate or not accommodate (this is often termed *psychological accommodation*) and listeners, in turn, interpret speakers' behavior as either accommodative or nonaccommodative. While the foregoing are

certainly related, their correspondence is not necessarily one-to-one. A speaker may intend to be accommodative and yet be interpreted as nonaccommodative (if, for example, the listener is operating from a different set of norms or expectations; see Gasiorek & Van de Poel, 2012). Similarly, a speaker may intend to be nonaccommodative, and yet be interpreted as accommodative (for historical reviews of the theory, see Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005; McGlone & Giles, 2011).

In a recent refinement of CAT, Giles and colleagues have proposed four key principles of communication accommodation (see Giles, Willemys, Gallois, & Anderson, 2007). The first states that individuals will accommodate when they wish to elicit or signal positive face, feelings, or a common social identity. The second states that, when attributed to positive intent, perceived accommodation increases recipients' satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive trait attributions of fellow interactants. The third states that, other interactional motives notwithstanding, speakers will nonaccommodate when they wish to signal dissatisfaction and/or disrespect for fellow interactants' traits, actions, or social identities. Finally, the fourth principle states that, when attributed to negative intent, perceived nonaccommodation will be evaluated and reacted to negatively by recipients.

Both accommodation and nonaccommodation may take a range of forms (Gallois & Giles, 1998); per the definitions above, it is the *perception* of a behavior as appropriate and facilitative that defines that behavior as accommodative, not any objective quality of the behavior itself. In some cases, direct reciprocity could be seen as accommodative; for example, when one is reciprocating cooperative or problem-solving behavior, the other party is likely to see this behavior as socially appropriate, adequately adjusted, and communicatively apposite. In other situations, however, direct reciprocity could be seen as nonaccommodative. For example, if one party

is attempting to be dominant and the other responds with a bid for their own dominance, this is likely to be seen as inappropriate from the first party's perspective and, therefore, nonaccommodative. Here, complementary behavior—for example, responding to a bid for dominance with submission—is more likely to be perceived as accommodative; within the framework of CAT, this has been labeled “speech complementarity” (Giles, 1980).

Considering CAT's approach to the sequencing of mutual adjustment (e.g., Genesee & Bourhis, 1988; Gnisci & Bakeman, 2007) in relation to work on patterns of behavior in the conflict and negotiation literature (e.g., Roloff, Putnam, & Anastasiou, 2003), we see important differences. First, as noted above, the conflict literature tends to classify communicative patterns in terms of objective behavior—for example, tactics are either symmetrical (reciprocal) or they are not—while CAT focuses more on parties' *subjective* experiences (see Thakerar, Giles, & Cheshire, 1982) and, by extension, their judgment and evaluation of these behaviors. In so doing, CAT highlights the importance of taking both the speaker and the listener's perspectives into account in attempting to understand the effects of communicative behaviors. Second, taking a more cognitively-oriented view of interaction, CAT also highlights social psychological factors contributing to the enactment of these different strategies, including contextual factors like the interpersonal and/or intergroup histories in which any interaction is embedded (Giles & Gasiorek, in press).

4. Dimensions of Accommodation and Conflict

CAT conceptualizes mutual adjustment as being multidimensional. Mutual adjustment is taken to occur along four distinct axes, termed *attuning strategies* in the CAT literature (see Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood,

1988): *approximation, interpretability, discourse management, and interpersonal control*. Approximation refers to individuals' adjusting their speech to be more similar to or different from their conversational partners'; these behaviors (as above) are typically termed convergence and divergence, respectively. This axis is primarily concerned with the characteristics of communication behavioral on a more micro (indeed, often non-conscious) level than most conflict literature is concerned with.

Interpretability strategies are actions taken to adjust the ease of comprehension of a message. Altering speech rate, the complexity of a message's lexicon or syntax, volume, tempo, repetition, prosody, and/or content (topic choice) are all potential forms interpretability strategies may take (Coupland et al., 1988). In some ways, this dimension serves as the foundation for those that follow—if one party is unable to meaningfully interpret what the other party communicates, relatively little else is relevant until that issue is addressed. That said, if each party is adapting their communication sufficiently for interaction to take place without serious misinterpretations or misunderstanding, this dimension is typically less relevant to sequences and patterns of interaction in conflict situations.

It is the two other dimensions, discourse management and interpersonal control, that are of primary relevance to work on mutual adjustment and patterns and sequences of behavior in conflict interaction. Discourse management refers to actions taken to guide the conversation to take into account another's social and conversational needs; this includes turn management, topic selection, topic sharing, and back-channeling. This dimension is essentially concerned with the “rules” of communication and interaction that parties establish and then follow; it addresses the procedural aspects of communication, and the

process(es) through which interactions are played out.

Finally, interpersonal control strategies are actions that address or adjust to role relations in an interaction—for example, power or status differentials, or behavior associated with formal or institutional roles and accompanying expectations. This dimension is primarily concerned with the relational element of communication, particularly as it relates to who does or does not have control or power in a given interaction, as well as more generally.

In their communicative behaviors, individuals may adjust along one or several of these dimensions, but these adjustments are not necessarily coordinated, and do not need to occur on all dimensions at once. Thus, it is possible (see for example, Bilous & Krauss, 1988) for an individual to accommodate on one dimension (e.g., discourse management) while simultaneously not accommodating on another dimension (e.g., interpersonal control).

Each of the interaction patterns delineated in the conflict literature—reciprocal, opposite, and complementary—can be characterized in terms of combinations of accommodation and nonaccommodation along different dimensions (Gallois & Giles, 1998). A reciprocal pattern of behavior, for example, may be seen as accommodative along the discourse management dimension: the parties have agreed, in a sense, on the procedural approach to the interaction, and are responding in kind to each other in terms of the way in which the interaction is managed and directed. Positive reciprocal interactions may be seen as accommodative along the interpersonal control dimension as well; if individuals are reciprocating positive behavior (for example, engaging in problem-solving), this suggests that they have reached a tacit agreement on who has what level of power and control in the interaction, and are operating within the constraints they have defined. Negative reciprocal interactions, however, may be seen

as *nonaccommodative* along this interpersonal control dimension. When one party makes a bid for control or dominance in the interaction (for example, with an offer) and the other responds with a counter-bid for dominance (for example, with a counter offer) rather than submission, this suggests that they have not agreed on the distribution of power or control in the interaction, and find each other's bids inappropriate. Nonaccommodation on the interpersonal control dimension holds the potential for escalation, as each party tries to establish power over the interaction and its outcomes.

Opposite interactions, in turn, represent a lack of accommodation (or at very least, a lack of agreement) on the discourse management dimension. Here, parties take different approaches to the process of interacting—for example, one seeking to cooperate by sharing information, while the other contends. Parties may or may not accommodate each other along the interpersonal control dimension; their lack of agreement on an approach to interaction is the primary characteristic of this category. While this kind of interaction can break conflict cycles as outlined above, it can also have problematic implications in terms of managing the interaction (which we will elaborate below).

Finally, complementary interactions, like positive reciprocal interactions, may be seen as accommodative on both the discourse management and the interpersonal control dimensions. Here, while parties may enact specific behaviors differently, they agree and accommodate each other on the overall procedural approach to interaction (discourse management), and have established power relations in the dynamic (interpersonal control). Participants' agreement on role relations here also helps explain why one often sees role specialization associated with complementary behavior.

These characterizations arguably offer a more nuanced, multidimensional view of reciprocal, opposite, and complementary moves in conflict interaction than these constructs have had, with potentially important implications in terms of understanding conflict interactions and preventing escalation. Considering these constructs through CAT's lens, the focus shifts from describing behavior to understanding in what ways individuals are actually contending (that is, not accommodating each other) or cooperating. This allows us to move beyond, for example, simply identifying negative reciprocal interactions as leading to conflict spirals to understanding that escalation is primarily a concern when there is a lack of accommodation along the interpersonal control dimension, but not necessarily other dimensions. As such, this perspective allows us to reframe escalation as a product of contention over power or control. This, in turn, may be helpful in diagnosing and diffusing a conflict situation: if we know that power or control is at issue, for example, we can focus an intervention specifically on that area, and in doing so potentially subvert an escalation or conflict spiral (see Ellis, 2012).

5. Logics of Exchange

Another approach to mutual adjustment in the context of negotiation has been centered on the constructs of symmetry and logics of exchange (McGinn & Keros, 2002). "Logics of exchange" refer to categories or general types of behaviors parties (both) used to interact with each other. Symmetry, in turn, is defined by parties' use of the same logics (as each other) in the context of negotiation. A symmetrical interaction could thus be considered akin to either a reciprocal or a complementary interaction (as defined above), depending on the specific tactic or logic used.

Logics of exchange are not conceptualized as behavioral sequences or patterns per se; rather, they are ways that parties can interact with each other. Logics essentially constitute

"rules" for interaction—that is, the procedures and processes interactants tacitly or explicitly agree to follow when communicating with each other. In CAT terms, they are essentially different approaches to discourse management.

McGinn and Keros (2002) identified three logics of exchange that their participants engaged in during negotiations: *haggling*, *opening up*, and *working together*. *Haggling* was a competitive approach to the negotiation in which each party sought the best possible deal for itself. *Opening up* was a cooperative approach in which parties exchanged information openly. Finally, *working together* was a cooperative approach in which parties engaged in problem-solving, but not an explicit revelation of critical information. In a working together logic, procedural discussions were often intensive, as parties tried to determine how best to come to an agreement without explicitly revealing the details of their position in the negotiation. From CAT's perspective, all three of these logics are accommodative along the discourse management dimension if they occur in a symmetric interaction—in other words, if there is the implicit agreement that both participants will engage in interaction using a particular approach. Each of these logics provides a set of interactional "rules" for how the interaction will play out; if each party abides by them, this may be seen as accommodative to each other.

Generally, understanding all interactions in which parties established a shared logic of exchange—regardless of the type of logic (i.e., competitive versus cooperative)—as accommodative in some form arguably expands upon established notions of both reciprocity and symmetry. This perspective suggests that we understand reciprocity not just as a direct match of behavior, but as a match on the procedural elements of interaction as well, underscoring once again the value of a multidimensional perspective on behavioral patterns in conflict interactions. If

interactants can agree on a set of processes to guide their interaction—in CAT terms, to accommodate on the discourse management dimension—their interaction may be seen as symmetrical and, by extension, cooperative in some regard, even if both parties are engaging in behavior traditionally seen as competitive or non-reciprocal.

Although a majority of parties in McGinn and Keros' (2002) study arrived at a shared logical of exchange relatively quickly, a minority did not; the authors described such interactions as “asymmetric”. In these situations, one party would pursue one logic, while the other would pursue another, seemingly unaware of or unwilling to synchronize with the other. Through CAT's lens, these interactions may be seen as nonaccommodative, particularly along the discourse management dimension: parties are not adjusting to each other sufficiently when it comes to establishing shared “rules” or procedures for interaction.

In several ways, asymmetric interactions were more problematic than symmetric interactions in that they were more likely to be: unstable; associated with (negative) emotional outbursts; and—at least in McGinn and Keros' (2002) study—resulted in comparatively low settlement rates (50%). The outcomes of these asymmetric interactions were largely consistent with CAT's findings regarding nonaccommodation: participants often experienced frustration and reacted to with anger (two of several negative emotions commonly associated with nonaccommodative encounters) as they each attempted to use different logics. Additionally, when emotions ran high—that is, at least one party recognized the asymmetry became angry about it—and there was the risk of one party ending the interaction. Such a response to nonaccommodative behavior is consistent with recent exploratory work within the CAT literature, where withdrawing from the interaction is one response young adults have exhibited to nonaccommodative communication

(Gasiorek, in press). In situations where one party appeared to be oblivious to the other—that is, one or both parties did not recognize the asymmetry—it was more common for one party to take advantage of the other, resulting in a less equitable interaction and negotiation outcome. Issues around both obliviousness and anger underscore the importance of considering both the speaker and the listener's perspectives: if one party is oblivious in the face of an asymmetric/nonaccommodative interaction, it is likely they believe they are being accommodative (or at very least, not intentionally being nonaccommodative), while the other party does not. Conceptualizing asymmetric encounters as nonaccommodative, particularly with respect to discourse management, is potentially helpful in the diagnosis of issues in these interactions: if asymmetry can be understood as a lack of mutual adjustment with respect to the procedural management of an interaction, this creates the possibility for targeted interventions.

6. Contextual Factors

Finally, one of the critiques of extant research on conflict management and negotiation is the paucity of work on the influence of external and/or contextual factors on interaction processes in negotiation (Oleklans et al., 2008). Here, CAT suggests several contextual variables that may be salient to individuals' communicative behavior in interaction. Specifically, the theory proposes that individuals make adjustments in their communicative behavior on the basis of judgments of their conversational partners' *communicative characteristics*, as well as individuals' desire to establish and maintain a *positive personal and social identity* (Gallois et al., 2005). It also states that each individual comes to an interaction with an initial orientation that is informed by participants' perceptions of their *interpersonal and/or intergroup histories* as well as their

understandings of the prevailing social and cultural *norms* and *values*.

Of particular interest to negotiation and conflict interactions is CAT's focus on social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as a force shaping behavior and the valence of evaluations associated with accommodative and nonaccommodative communication; these evaluations can then influence the course of future interaction. For example, CAT would predict that asymmetric interactions are most likely to happen when individuals share a less positive interpersonal or intergroup history, and/or in situation where individuals want to assert their distinctiveness from the other party. In McGinn and Keros' (2002) study, this would be most likely in instances of strangers negotiating, particularly if some element of the stranger's identity (e.g., ethnic or religious background) triggered negative associations for the other party. In their study, findings were essentially consistent with those predictions; of those that did not reach a shared logic of exchange, only one dyad was a set of friends; the other sixteen were strangers. However, since specific demographic information about dyads in each condition was not provided in the article, there is no way to know to what extent issues such as intergroup history affected the sixteen asymmetric negotiations between strangers.

A fairly robust body of literature using the theory supports the salience of the social psychological variables identified by CAT to interaction processes and outcomes in a range of settings (see Shepard, Giles, & Le Poire, 2001). Future empirical work interested in exploring the intersection of social identity and interaction processes in negotiation should thus consider incorporating intergroup and interpersonal history, cultural norms and values, and the value that individuals place on different elements of their personal and social identities into its research designs.

7. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have suggested that empirical work on mutual adjustment and behavioral patterns in conflict interactions could be usefully informed by communication theory. Specifically, CAT has been proposed as a useful framework to consider in seeking to understand and subsequently diagnose potential issues in conflict interaction. We suggest that CAT's notions of accommodation and nonaccommodation along multiple dimensions of interaction offer a different and potentially fruitful way to think about patterns and sequences of behavior in conflict interactions, as well as constructs of reciprocity, opposition, and complementarity. Using CAT's construct of attuning strategies as a lens, we have sought to demonstrate that communication in conflict situations is multidimensional, and that accommodation—and therefore, reciprocity, opposition, and complementarity, depending on the situation—may occur along multiple axes, with different consequences for each axis.

First, accommodation along the interpretability axis provides individuals with a basis for understanding each others' communication; without accommodation here, it is difficult to impossible for parties to accommodate each other on other dimensions, communicate or even interact. Second, accommodation along the interpersonal control dimension is associated with participants' orientation as cooperative versus competitive. Here, accommodation of the other party (which typically takes the form of complementarity) generally results in a cooperative orientation with agreed-upon roles and power dynamics, while nonaccommodation (here, typically taking the form of reciprocity) results in a more competitive orientation, where parties compete in their bids for power and control of the interaction.

Third, accommodation (i.e., reciprocity) along the discourse management axis provides

parties with a shared set of “rules” for interaction—“logics of exchange” in McGinn and Keros’ (2002) terms—to which they both conform. Nonaccommodation on this axis (i.e., opposition) leads to asymmetry in interaction, and by extension greater potential for frustration, abandonment, and/or lack of settlement in the context of negotiation. The contrast between symmetric and asymmetric interactions—which, through a CAT lens, are distinguished by differential accommodation in terms of discourse management—highlights the importance of the procedural dimension of interaction. Although an interactional, process view of conflict ostensibly focuses on how interactional processes affect outcomes, examining sequences and patterns of behaviors does not necessarily address the question of whether interactants are adjusting for each other with respect to the *nature* of the process (i.e., the “rules” of interaction or logic of exchange). However, adjustment along this dimension of the interaction may have important consequences for both the dynamics of encounter and for related outcomes. Indeed, empirical work on conflict in heterogeneous cultural workgroups has linked discussing discourse management strategies (i.e., explicitly establishing interactional rules or procedures) with productive conflict (Ayoko et al., 2002).

Reconsidering interactional work on conflict through the lens of CAT has important practical implications, in addition to its theoretical interest. An expanded conceptualization of traditional behavioral patterns in conflict interaction and a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes mutual adjustment each have the potential to improve the management of conflict situations. Understanding asymmetric interactions as nonaccommodative in terms of discourse management, for example, suggests targeted interventions specifically addressing procedural aspects of interaction, such as mediation (Putnam, 2009). Additionally, considering reciprocity, opposition, and complementarity in terms of (non)accommodation along several

distinct dimensions allows us to see how they can differentially contribute to constructive and destructive management of conflict in different contexts and situations. This perspective shows us that not all instances of these patterns are created equal, and may in fact be products of different elements (e.g., disagreements over power dynamics in one situation, but disagreement on “rules” of interaction in another); understanding the roles of each of these dimensions in a given conflict may be valuable information in assessing how best to proceed and/or intervene.

Lastly, we briefly discussed contextual factors that CAT proposes may impact the nature of communication in a conflict situation, namely interpersonal and intergroup histories, as well as variables related to social identity. This is an area ripe for future empirical work in the Middle East as elsewhere, as CAT has demonstrated the potential impact of these variables in interaction, but there has been relatively little research on their effect on the interactional dynamics of *conflict* situations explicitly. Potential questions of theoretical interest include the ways CAT may need to be refined not only to meet the demands of contexts where very different religious philosophies, norms and orders prevail, but also with respect to negotiations between individuals from the same social category when they passionately represent groups with a long history of conflict (see Dragojevic & Giles, in press). This is an area with great potential; it is our hope that the material presented here may both encourage and serve as a basis for further efforts to fruitfully apply CAT, as well as other communication-centered theoretical frameworks, to research in the area of mutual influence and interactional dynamics in conflict.

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