Chapter 3

Individual Conflict Engagement: Can Verbal Style and Influence Tactic Usage Improve the Performance of Individuals Engaging in Conflicts in Large Online Teams?

Based on Greer & Jehn (2008a)

Conflict is a fundamental aspect of organization life. To assess its consequences for teams and organizations, researchers have accumulated a wealth of knowledge on the group-level dynamics and effects of conflict in the organizational setting (for reviews, see De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). However, recent work suggests that not all group members may experience, or engage in, group processes equally (Bliese & Halverson, 1998; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn, Rupert, & Nauta, 2006; Jehn & Rispens, 2007; Klein & House, 1995). Conflict therefore may not be an entirely group-level phenomenon. Rather, certain individuals may more actively engage in conflict than others. However, research has yet to assess the repercussions of differences in individual levels of engagement in conflict. Therefore, in this study, we examine how an individual’s engagement in conflict affects the individual’s performance in the group, and we also examine how this relationship may differ depending on how the individual communicates in the conflict situation, the tactics the individual chooses to use, and the type of conflict in which the individual engages.

Individual engagement in conflict can be defined as an individual’s behavioral confrontation of conflict issues. Individual engagement in conflict
can be viewed as the opposite end of the spectrum from conflict avoidance. 
While this dichotomy has long existed in the literature on close relationships 
(e.g., Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Fincham, 2003; Gottman, 1993) 
and often been implied to exist in the conflict management literature (e.g., De 
Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001; Desivilya & Eizen, 2005; 
Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), scant research has examined the specific effects of 
individual conflict engagement on individual performance. Furthermore, 
individual conflict engagement is distinct from past conflict research which 
has examined perceptions of intragroup conflict (for a meta-analysis of this 
literature, see De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) in that individual conflict 
engagement focuses on individual conflict behaviors in team settings. Our 
examination of individual conflict engagement in the group setting is one of 
the first such investigations, despite the fact that the distinction between 
conflict perception and conflict engagement has been theoretically proposed in 
classic theories on conflict (e.g., Pondy, 1967). Pondy (1967) suggested that 
conflict engagement, or ‘manifest’ conflict as termed by Pondy, is a stage in 
the conflict process, which follows the perception of a conflict. To illustrate, a 
member may perceive that others’ opinions are in disagreement to the 
member’s own opinion. The member then may choose whether or not to 
verbally contradict the opinions of the others. If the member does choose to 
express a contradictory opinion, this would be defined as conflict engagement. 
In this chapter, our focus is on the consequences of this particular choice and 
phase of the conflict process – conflict engagement. 

Our study offers several contributions to existing conflict research. 
First of all, in line with the growing literature on asymmetric perceptions 
within teams (Bliese & Halverson, 1998; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al., 
2006; Jehn & Rispens, 2007; Klein & House, 1995), we challenge the idea 
that conflict should be conceptualized and investigated primarily at the group 
level; that is, we propose that individuals can have very different perceptions of, 
and engagement in, a conflict within the same group. We extend the 
literature on asymmetric conflict perceptions (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et 
al., 2006; Jehn & Rispens, 2007) by suggesting that not only perceptions of 
conflict, but also actual engagement in conflict may vary among group 
members. We also build upon work in the conflict management literature 
(e.g., De Dreu et al., 2001; Desivilya & Eizen, 2005; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986)
which has examined differences in conflict management styles by investigating whether an individual’s basic decision to engage in conflict, or not, may impact the individual’s performance.

Secondly, we identify specific actions individuals may take when engaging in conflict to improve their own performance. Specifically, we examine different strategies individuals may take to assert their opinion to others and influence them to agree. We draw on and extend the influence tactic literature (e.g., Farmer, Maslyn, Fedor, & Goodman, 1997; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1985; Yukl & Tracey, 1992) by examining the different influence strategies an individual might employ specifically in conflict situations. In addition to what individuals say in a conflict, we also propose that how they say it may determine how engaging in conflict affects their performance. Therefore, we also look at the role of verbal style in affecting the relationship between engagement in conflict and individual performance.

Thirdly, we suggest that the type of conflict (e.g., relationship or task; Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) in which an individual engages may have different dynamics and call for the usage of different types of conflict tactics (i.e., different influence tactics or different levels of verbal style). For example, an individual might engage in a task conflict by verbally disagreeing with another member’s work-related opinion. When engaging in such a conflict over a work-related issue, it may be more important to remain very task-focused and rational. In contrast, when an individual engages in relationship conflict, such as verbally telling someone that they dislike a certain aspect of a person’s behavior, it might be more important to express this opinion in a kind manner that communicates that the individual still values the relationship. This contributes to the existing conflict literature (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) by providing one of the first linkages between specific conflict tactics and different conflict types (relationship and task). We extend past research which has suggested that different types of conflict may call for different conflict management strategies (Weingart & Jehn, 2000) by providing a set of tactics of which some may be more or less appropriate for the different types of conflict that an individual may engage in.

Finally, we contribute to conflict research by testing the dynamics of conflict in an understudied setting. Specifically, we investigate the above
ideas in the context of large online listserv groups, drawing upon e-mail and interview data collected over a period of three years from political organizing groups located in the United States. The particular form of computer-mediated communication utilized by these large listserv groups is electronic mail, or e-mail. E-mail is a type of interpersonal message service that allows the transmission of written messages from one point to another electronically, rather than by physical delivery (Loperfido, 1993). E-mail has become an important communication tool for millions of people world-wide (Friedman & Currall, 2003). With this sample, we therefore investigate how differences in individual conflict engagement may affect individual performance.

**Theoretical Background**

In this chapter, we test the proposition that the degree to which individuals engage in conflict may affect their performance. We also investigate whether the manner in which individuals choose to conduct themselves while engaging in the conflict may help determine whether their engagement in conflict helps or hurts their performance. Past work has defined individual performance as “the degree to which the member meets the standards of the group and organization as rated by the group’s superior, company performance evaluations, and individual productivity records” (Jehn, 1995: 257). We adapt this definition to assess the performance of members in large e-mail listserv groups, such as the listserves associated with, for example, political organizing groups. We therefore define individual performance in large online groups as the degree to which the member meets the standards of the group, enabling the achievement of both group goals and individual development as a contributing member in ideas and actions. A successful member, for example, would be actively involved in planning a group action, coordinating media coverage for a group protest, and contacting public officials about policy change.

**Performance Effects of Individual Engagement in Relationship and Task Conflict**

In past research on group-level conflict, two main types of conflict have been examined – relationship conflict and task conflict (e.g., Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995). Relationship conflicts are
disagreements between members that are about personal issues and incompatibilities. Relationship conflicts tend to be characterized by negative feelings such as anger, distrust, and frustration, and can lead to reduced satisfaction and performance (e.g., Jehn, 1995) because of distraction, misspent time and effort, and decreased cognitive processes (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Task conflicts are disagreements over values and opinions related to the task at hand. A moderate amount of task conflict may positively affect individual performance, as being challenged on a work-related issue may increase effort, cognitive processing, and task focus (e.g., Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). While a recent meta-analysis by De Dreu and Weingart (2003) found that both relationship and task conflict were detrimental to group performance, we propose in the following sections that the effects of individual engagement in conflict may differ per type of conflict. We thus extend the work by both De Dreu and Weingart (2003) and Jehn (1995) by examining the effects of individual engagement in these conflict types on individual performance.

**Individual Engagement in Relationship Conflict**

Past research has found that relationship conflict negatively affects individual well-being and performance (e.g., Dijkstra, van Dierendonck, & Evers, 2005; Jehn, 1995). In line with this, we propose that individual engagement in relationship conflict will have negative outcomes for the individual. This is because engagement in relationship conflict can distract individuals from the task at hand through an increased focus on interpersonal relationships rather than work-related issues (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). For example, if a member makes a point of expressing his dislike of another group member, the member spends time during this outburst that is not task-related. Additionally, the expression of such a sentiment may also lead to continued distraction from work because of how other members respond to this relationship conflict engagement. For example, such an outburst could be perceived as interpersonal abuse, which could lead other group members to seek revenge (c.f. Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). The potential conflict spiral which could result because of the member’s relationship conflict engagement may serve to further distract the member from the task at hand. Therefore, an individual who chooses to engage in relationship conflict may come to spend
an increasing amount of time on non-work related issues, and therefore may become less likely to be able to successfully accomplish organizational tasks and perform well in the organization.

Furthermore, an individual who feels compelled to engage in relationship conflict is likely to be highly emotional. For example, past qualitative research has suggested a high degree of emotionality to exist around the verbal confrontation of interpersonal issues (e.g., Jehn, 1997). Members engaging in relationship conflict may experience anger, frustration, strain and uneasiness (e.g., Walton & Dutton, 1969), which may reduce an individual’s cognitive processing (Brief & Weiss, 2002). Indeed, research has suggested that engagement in relationship conflict may limit the cognitive processing of members and thus hinder their ability to assess new information (e.g., Pelled, 1996). Additionally, by engaging in a relationship conflict, these negative emotions are more likely to become visible to other members and may then spread to other members through a process of emotional contagion (e.g., Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). The resulting negative environment in the group may serve to even further accentuate the emotionality of the member who engaged in the relationship conflict and may further limit the member’s cognitive processing and ability to perform well in the organization. Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1. The degree to which an individual engages in relationship conflict will be negatively related to that individual’s performance.

Individual Engagement in Task Conflict

In contrast, we suggest that an individual’s engagement in task conflict may have a positive effect on individual performance. First of all, when an individual chooses to voice a conflicting opinion – i.e. engages in task conflict – this expression of voice can help improve the individual’s acceptance of group and organizational decisions (e.g., LaTour, 1978; Lind et al., 1980; see Lind & Tyler, 1988 for a review). This can improve how the individual chooses to react to organizational decisions (for a review see Greenberg & Folger, 1983), and thereby individual performance. The reason for this is that people prefer procedures which allow them control over the decision-making process (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). This is because people
feel that such ‘process control’ (Lind & Tyler, 1988) can enable them to obtain favorable outcomes (c.f. Houlden, Latour, Walker, & Thibatu, 1978; van Prooijen, Karremans, & van Beest, 2006). For example, imagine an individual who engages in task conflict and disagrees with how other members want to proceed with an organizational task (such as by saying a better strategy would be to picket in front of building x rather than building y). If the organization still decides to picket in front of the other building – building y, but says at the next event, they can picket building x, the individual may be more accepting of this decision and be able to act in a more constructive, performance-enhancing way than if the individual had not engaged in task conflict and voiced the dissenting opinion. Even if the individual does not obtain favorable outcomes, an individual is still likely to enjoy performance benefits. For example, even if the organization only chooses to picket the building to which the member was opposed, research has shown that individuals experience performance benefits when important others understand them, even if that understanding is not acted upon (Thatcher & Greer, 2008). Even if the individual did not get the option the individual wanted, others in the group may now better understand the individual. This means that they may be more empathetic towards the individual as well as possess more accurate knowledge of the individual’s opinions. This may create a more positive, supportive environment which will allow the individual to perform better. Therefore, engagement in task conflict may help improve individual’s performance in the organization.

In addition to the performance enhancing powers of just being able to exert voice and have a sense of process control in the team (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988), engaging in task conflict may also help individuals improve their own understanding of the issue at hand and thereby their ability to contribute to the group. For example, Ashby’s (1956) classical theory of requisite variety posits the importance of matching the complexity of decisions with the surrounding complexity of the environment. Drawing on this, we suggest that when interacting in complex organizational environments, an individual who engages in task conflict may gain important knowledge of differing perspectives within the team. For example, for a member to successfully challenge another member’s opinion they must first do a deeper processing of the other’s opinion in order to present an argument (c.f. Olson et al., 2007).
The knowledge gained from this may enable the individual to better target task-related efforts and thus improve the individual’s performance. Indeed, a successful understanding of the task at hand has been shown to be critical for organizational members to implement organizational strategies (Woolridge & Floyd, 1990). As an additional benefit, when a member expresses an opinion, the opinion may be discussed and debated by other team members. This dissection by other group members of the member’s ideas about the task may help improve the focal member’s understanding of the task and ability to perform well. In line with this, past research has also suggested that engaging in task conflict may improve an individuals’ understanding of the issues involved (e.g., Olson et al., 2007; Putnam, 1994) as well as individual effort and task focus (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Therefore, we propose that:

**Hypothesis 2.** The degree to which an individual engages in task conflict will be positively related to that individual’s performance.

### The Role of Conflict Tactics

Researchers who believe that some sorts of conflict can be positive have investigated ways to harvest the positive side of conflict while minimizing the negative side (e.g., De Church & Marks, 2001). The resulting area of study, conflict management, focuses on directing conflict towards potentially productive task conflict, such as improved dialogue, rather than destructive relationship conflict, such as personal attacks (Deutsch, 1973). Conflicts that are effectively managed can improve individual performance through constructive debate and a better exploration of alternatives (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). In this study, we propose a set of conflict tactics that can be used by individuals to improve their performance when engaging in conflict. We propose verbal style and influence tactics as moderators that can be strategically used to manage conflicts, so that individuals can engage in conflicts in a way that maximizes their own performance in the organization.

#### Verbal Style

Verbal style is wording used by a person that affects the way others assign meaning to what the person says (Baker, 1990). Strong verbal style can include correct grammar, the absence of misspellings, and the use of clear language. Past work by Baker (1990) measured strong verbal style by the absence of non-fluencies (“well, like, mean, you know”), qualifiers (“maybe,
perhaps, would, could, might”), and indefiniteness (“this, that, those, some, stuff, it, sometimes, someone, something, somewhere, interesting”). An example of a statement with strong verbal style is “The point of this discussion is to decide upon the next political action of our group.” while in contrast, an example of weak verbal style is “well, uh, i think maybee that the point of this discussion is…”. When verbal style is strong, recipients are able to easily understand the point of the message, increasing the credibility of the sender. This increased credibility of the member can improve the member’s ability to engage in both task and relationship conflicts, as the member’s points are given more credence. In contrast, a member that uses weak verbal style (such as grammatical errors or indefinite language in the communication) may be taken less seriously in his or her attempt to manage a conflict.

We propose that strong verbal style can help reduce the negative effect of engagement in relationship conflict on individual performance. When verbal style is strong, the likelihood of misunderstandings resulting from the message is decreased. This can help benefit individuals engaging in relationship conflict by keeping the conflict focused on the single issue it should be about, and preventing misunderstandings and further conflicts that could lead to performance-reducing conflict cycles (e.g., Brett, Shapiro & Lytle, 1998). This is in line with the point made by Griffith et al. (2003) who suggest that the misinterpretation of communications may lead to greater relationship conflict. Relatedly, strong verbal style can communicate that the member has carefully thought through the argument the member is airing, and can therefore communicate that the member cares deeply about the relationship. This may reduce the likelihood of the relationship conflict engagement being interpreted as interpersonal abuse and resulting performance-reducing conflict spirals (Aquino et al., 2001). Therefore, we propose that strong verbal style will reduce the negative effects of individual engagement in relationship conflict on individual performance.

Furthermore, we suggest that strong verbal style can also help individuals engaging in task conflict. First of all, when an individual utilizes strong verbal style, the individual may have to more carefully think through the argument the individual wants to express, as the individual contemplates the best wording to use. This may amplify the degree to which the individual
thinks about the opinions of others compared to his or her own opinion, thereby increasing the cognitive processing and performance benefits associated with task conflict engagement (Olson et al., 2007). Additionally, when the individual uses strong verbal style, the argument by the individual may be clearer and easier for the other members to discuss and give comments on. This may further improve the quality of feedback the individual can get on the idea, which may increase the individual’s understanding of the task at hand (c.f. Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Putnam, 1994). This in turn may help the individual to better implement organizational strategies (Woolridge & Floyd, 1990) and perform well in the organization. Therefore, strong verbal style can thus moderate the way in which the member’s message is perceived, increasing the positive effects of task conflict on individual performance.

*Hypothesis 3a.* Verbal style moderates the relationship between individual engagement in relationship conflict and individual performance, such that the use of strong verbal style during engagement in relationship conflict decreases the negative effect of engagement in relationship conflict on individual performance.  

*Hypothesis 3b.* Verbal style moderates the relationship between individual engagement in task conflict and individual performance, such that the use of strong verbal style during engagement in task conflict increases the positive effect of engagement in task conflict on individual performance.

**Influence Tactic Usage**

To effectively manage and resolve a conflict, an individual may have to exert power to change the nature of an interaction (Deutsch, 1973). This exertion of power may be through the use of different influence tactics. Influence tactics may consist of hard, soft, or rational tactics (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1985). Hard tactics consist of potentially aggressive requests for compliance (Barry & Shapiro, 1992; Farmer et al., 1997; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1985). Soft tactics consist of the use of friendliness or ingratiation to gain compliance with a request (Barry & Shapiro, 1992; Farmer et al., 1997; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1985). Rational tactics consist of information sharing and the
application of logic to convince a target to comply with a request (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1985; Yukl & Tracey, 1992).

We propose that use of soft or rational tactics by an individual engaging in conflict will increase the positive effect of engagement in task conflict and decrease the negative effect of engagement in relationship conflict on individual performance while the use of hard tactics will have the opposite effects. For example, the use of soft tactics (such as the use of flattery or ingratiation to reach a goal) could be used to manage conflicts (“Everyone has great ideas. However, it is important for the group goals that we make a decision for our next action.”) in a way that will promote the individual’s performance in the group through allowing the individual to engage in the conflict but still communicate a concern for the relationships in the group. We therefore propose new conflict management tools that can be used to optimize the potentially positive effects of engagement in task conflict while minimizing the negative effects of engagement in relationship conflict.

Soft tactics, or ingratiation as they are often simply called, involve the use of friendliness or flattery to gain compliance with a request. Ingratiation is a process whereby a person tries to improve his/her attractiveness in the eyes of others (Jones, 1964). Ingratiation and flattery may prove useful during a conflict. In this chapter, we propose that the usage of soft tactics will increase the performance of an individual engaging in a relationship conflict. Specifically, the usage of soft tactics may help to soothe another organizational member during a relationship conflict and reduce the negative effects of engaging in relationship conflict by demonstrating to the other members that the relationship is important. This is in line with research which has suggested that ingratiation can create a social bond between individuals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). By creating this bond and showing that the relationship is important, the member may be able to have a more meaningful discussion about the problems in the relationship. With the knowledge gained from this discussion, the member may be better able to understand and navigate the social dynamics of the group in a way that can help improve the member’s individual performance. Additionally, by communicating concern for the relationship, members may reduce the likelihood of other members interpreting the focal member’s engagement in relationship conflict as abusive or hostile, thereby lessening the likelihood of retaliatory conflict spirals (Aquino et al.,
This may then reduce the likelihood of the relationship conflict engagement continuing to distract the member from the task at hand. We therefore propose that the usage of soft tactics during a relationship conflict will help improve the performance of the individual member engaging in the relationship conflict.

Soft tactics may also improve the performance of individuals engaging in task conflict. For example, negotiation research has shown that the development of rapport may help increase the likelihood of more mutually beneficial settlements (Moore, Kurtzberg, Thompson, & Morris, 1999). This is consistent with traditional conflict management research, which has found agreeable behavior to be a successful conflict management technique in increasing the positive effects of task conflict (De Church & Marks, 2001). Developing rapport through the use of soft tactics may help improve the performance of individuals engaging in task conflict by allowing members to express conflicting opinions in a way that other members are more receptive to because the importance of the relationship has been acknowledged. Additionally, the use of soft tactics by a member engaging in a task conflict may also make other members more willing to offer constructive feedback on the member’s opinion. This may further increase the positive effects of engagement in task conflict on individual understanding (e.g., Olson et al., 2007; Putnam, 1994), and thus on individual performance. We therefore propose that:

**Hypothesis 4a.** Soft tactics moderate the relationship between individual engagement in relationship conflict and individual performance, such that the use of soft tactics during engagement in relationship conflict decreases the negative effect of engagement in relationship conflict on individual performance.

**Hypothesis 4b.** Soft tactics moderate the relationship between individual engagement in task conflict and individual performance, such that the use of soft tactics during engagement in an task conflict increases the positive effect of engagement in task conflict on individual performance.

Rational tactics involve the use of logical reasoning to convince influence targets why they should comply. Past research has found rational
tactics to be the most commonly used influence tactic (e.g., Farmer et al., 1997). We propose rational tactics as also being a successful conflict management technique because they are devoid of emotional elements that could incite or escalate a relationship conflict and because they can help increase understanding of task-related issues. Specifically, we propose that the use of rational tactics may increase the positive effects of task conflict on performance and decrease the negative effects of relationship conflict on individual performance. For example, a member could use rational tactics by calmly explaining his reasoning for a stated position (e.g., “I think we should pursue this goal for reasons x, y, and z”).

The use of rational tactics may help decrease the negative effects of engaging in relationship conflict on individual performance by bringing a voice of reason into emotionally charged interpersonal issues (Jehn, 1997). By focusing on the facts of a personal confrontation in a logical manner, the use of rational tactics may exert a calming influence on relationship conflicts. For example, if a member focuses on the facts in a rational matter (‘in the e-mail you sent on November 30th, I felt that your statement about our fundraising efforts made me look bad’ as opposed to just ‘you are making me look bad’), this may help clarify the issue to other members, inject a tone of rationality into the matter, and prevent further misunderstandings. Together, this may reduce the negative emotionality associated with relationship conflicts and the associated cognitive processing detriments (Brief & Weiss, 2002). Furthermore, if members are able to rationally discuss the personal issue in contention without inciting negative emotions, the member engaging in the conflict may be able to help other members better understand what is important to the member. Having other team members understand a focal member better, even on non-work-related matters, has been shown to increase the performance of the focal member through enabling other team members to better adapt to and work with the member interpersonally (Thatcher & Greer, 2008). Therefore, the use of clear, logical reasoning while engaging in a relationship conflict may help reduce the negative effects of an individual’s engagement in relationship conflict.

Members can also use rational tactics to guide task conflicts, such as to clarify issues of contention. This may improve the relationship between task conflict engagement and individual performance. First of all, to structure
one’s arguments in an especially rational way may force the individual to even more deeply process the issues at hand in the group. The improved understanding the member gains from this may help the member better meet organizational goals (Woolridge & Floyd, 1990). Additionally, by using rational persuasion to guide task debates, the member engaging in task conflict may improve the ability of others to understand the opinions offered by the member. This will improve the ability of other members to listen to, understand, and acknowledge the member’s opinion, which can increase the likelihood of a member feeling a sense of voice (Lind & Tyler, 1988) after engaging in task conflict. Additionally, this may improve the feedback the member is able to get on the opinion from other members. By improving this feedback, this in turn may increase the likelihood of the member’s engagement in task conflict resulting in the member’s increased understanding of the issues at hand (e.g., Olson et al., 2007; Putnam, 1994) and ability to perform well in the group. Therefore, we propose that:

*Hypothesis 5a.* Rational tactics moderate the relationship between individual engagement in relationship conflict and individual performance, such that the use of rational tactics during engagement in a relationship conflict decreases the negative effect of engagement in relationship conflict on individual performance.

*Hypothesis 5b.* Rational tactics moderate the relationship between individual engagement in task conflict and individual performance, such that the use of rational tactics during engagement in task conflict increases the positive effect of engagement in task conflict on individual performance.

Hard tactics often refer to the use of direct, aggressive requests from a leader to a subordinate to gain compliance. In groups that lack a clear hierarchy, such as the large online listserv groups in this study, the use of hard tactics which clearly communicate a status difference may not be condoned by other group members. For example, a very directive statement such as “everyone quit fighting NOW” would not be well-received when coming from someone a member perceives as a peer, and could lead that person to respond negatively to the statement coming from the member. This could serve to further distract the member from the task at hand, increasing
the negative effects of engaging in relationship conflict on performance and decreasing the positive effects of engaging in task conflict on performance. Negotiation research even suggests that in egalitarian cultures, such as those often found in large online listserve groups, the use of hard tactics may be interpreted by other members as contentious behavior (Adair, Okumura, & Brett, 2001), leading to a conflict spiral that may negatively impact negotiation outcomes for all parties involved (e.g., Brett et al., 1998). Additionally, hard tactics are by nature considered unfriendly (van Knippenberg & Steensma, 2003). For this reason as well, hard tactics are likely to further increase the likelihood of relationship conflict engagement being interpreted as interpersonal abuse and causing retaliatory conflict spirals (Aquino et al., 2001). For example, if a member makes a threatening order (“Stop fighting, or you have to leave our group”), the member might actually escalate the fight as other members may now also have a personal problem with the member attempting to stop the conflict because of his unfriendly statement. This would exacerbate the negative effects of engagement in relationship conflict, reducing an individual’s ability to work towards group goals and therefore reducing individual performance.

Task conflict engagement is also likely to have its potential positive effects reduced by the use of hard tactics. The general unfriendliness of hard tactics (e.g., van Knippenberg & Steensma, 2003) could decrease the willingness of other members to provide constructive feedback on the member’s opinion. This would reduce the information provided to the member based on the member’s task conflict engagement, and thereby reduce one of the primary benefits of task conflict engagement for individual performance – improved understanding of the task at hand (e.g., Olson et al., 2007; Putnam, 1994). Furthermore, as described earlier, the use of hard tactics can communicate an unwelcome power advantage when not coming from a formal leader of a hierarchical organization (Adair et al., 2001), which may lead to retaliatory behaviors by other members (Brett et al., 1998) and reduce the willingness of other members to try to understand the focal member. This may distract the member from the task at hand, and reduce another important benefit of task conflict – improving the understanding others have of the individual (Thatcher & Greer, 2008). Therefore, hard tactics may reduce the positive aspects of task conflict engagement and may
also introduce negative aspects, such as retaliatory conflict spirals (e.g., Aquino et al., 2001) which could distract the member from the task at hand. We therefore propose that:

*Hypothesis 6a.* Hard tactics moderate the relationship between individual engagement in relationship conflict and individual performance, such that the use of hard tactics during engagement in relationship conflict increases the negative effect of engagement in relationship conflict on individual performance.

*Hypothesis 6b.* Hard tactics moderate the relationship between individual engagement in task conflict and individual performance, such that the use of hard tactics during engagement in task conflict decreases the positive effect of engagement in task conflict on individual performance.

**Methods**

**Data and Sample**

We conducted a three-year longitudinal multi-method field study of political-organizing organizations located in the United States that used e-mail listserves extensively for their communications. These organizations included, for instance, an international women’s organization, a university peace organization, an environmental organization, and a community improvement organization. We collected e-mail data from these organizations over a period of 36 months by becoming a member of the general list serves for the organizations, conducting interviews with members, taking field notes at meetings, and collecting hard copies of handouts from organizational meetings and other ideological materials, similar to the methods employed by Phillips and Eisenberg (1993). Given the complexity of influence attempts, as well as conflict, the use of qualitative research methods in conjunction with traditional quantitative methods is an especially useful way to study the relationships between influence, conflict, and performance (c.f. Barry & Fulmer, 2004; Jehn, 1997; Lee, 1999).

The quantitative data in our study stem primarily from text analyses and coding of our e-mail sample. Our total e-mail sample consisted of 7,617 e-mails, sent from a total of 631 members representing 10 different
organizations. Fifty-four percent of the members were female, and the average member age was 33. All e-mails in our sample were sent to the entire organization via the group listserv, and the vast majority of organizational members participated on the e-mail listserv. For example, in an interview, one member stated: “E-mail is, like, very useful. I would say it is much more useful than, like, hanging flyers but does that make sense? It is just a mass mobilization.” No significant differences were found across the organizations on our variables of interest.

On average, members communicated with each other over the e-mail listserv five times per week (and around actions every day), attended meetings once a month, and political action events (e.g., protests) two or three times in the year. We did have two organizations in which members only interacted online, which allowed us to compare conflict engagement between members who interacted only online and who interacted both online and face-to-face. In a multivariate analysis of the variables in our study, we did not find any significant differences to exist between members in organizations who only interacted online and members in organizations who interacted both online and face-to-face.

**Measures**

Our study includes three separate quantitative measures (text analysis, coder ratings, and expert ethnographic ratings) as well as qualitative data from interviews. For the purposes of this study, we chose to focus only on active members of the organization - specifically, members who sent more than 1% of an organization’s e-mails, as done in past research by Finholt, Sproull, and Kiesler (2002). This reduced our sample size to 165 members who sent in total 7,501 emails. In the following sections, we will first discuss the procedures by which the text analyses, coder ratings, and interviews were obtained, then discuss the existing literature we drew on for the operationalizations of each construct. Following that, we will discuss our performance variable and the two methods we utilized for that – coder ratings and expert ethnographic ratings.

**Text analyses.** We analyzed all 7,501 e-mails through a text-analysis engine based on procedures set forth in previous research (e.g., Baker, 1990; Jehn, 1997). The complete list of keywords used can be found in the
Appendix. We first sorted the e-mails into individual text files for each member. These files were subsequently searched for the keywords using the text-analysis engine MonoConc Pro 2.0 (Barlow, 2000). From this, we were able to obtain the frequencies of keywords for each construct. For several keywords, some occurrences in the initial keyword count were actually misleading because they were preceded by a negation phrase, such as “not good”. To account for this, we used a Boolean search in Monoconc to count the number of occurrences a word occurred in conjunction with a negation term. This total was then subtracted from the first overall total of the keyword to give an appropriate measure of keyword use.

**Coder ratings.** The second quantitative measurement we used was the use of independent coders. We hired two student assistants who were blind to the hypotheses of this study to do the coding. Because it was not feasible for the coders to code 7,501 e-mails, we reduced the sample size for coding down to 1031 e-mails based on the procedure use by Finholt, Sproull, and Kiesler (2002). Members who sent more than 1% of a group’s e-mails were chosen for coding, presuming that members who sent less than 1% of the e-mails were not active participants of the group. Of the members who sent more than 1% of the e-mails, one e-mail per month for each month of the study was randomly selected for coding, similar to the selection process of archived reply files done by Finholt et al. (2002). This strategy allowed 13.7% of the e-mails to be sampled, as is common with this method. We employed the two student assistant mention above, who were both blind to the hypotheses of this study, to code this sample of e-mails, with each coder rating each of the 1,031 emails that resulted from the sampling strategy above. The coders read the full e-mail, including the anonymized heading (including who the e-mail was sent from and to, the date the e-mail was sent, if the e-mail was sent with importance, and the name of any attachments) and message content. After receiving verbal instructions including a discussion of the definitions of constructs underlying the questions they were to respond to (see Appendix 1 for list of questions used for each construct), the coders then answered a series of questions about each of the e-mails, responding on a Likert scale of 1-7 (with 7 being high). During this verbal discussion, several decision rules were established between the coders, such as how they would code an e-mail that was just a forward of information (the decision was that if the
information contributed to group’s goals, it would receive a higher
ingagement in task conflict (the decision was that
task conflict means disagreement, and that signs of disagreement, such as “I
oppose Member X on that point” were indicative of higher levels of
individual engagement in task conflict).

We will next discuss the interviews conducted, and then, in the
ensuing sections, we will detail how our coder questions and keywords were
chosen. Additionally, we will discuss how our coder ratings relate to our
qualitative data, and we will provide more detailed information on the
reliabilities of the specific constructs.

**Individual engagement in relationship and task conflict.** After an
initial pretest of the Jehn (1995) relationship and task conflict items for use in
coding (adapted to the individual level), we utilized the questions on which
our e-mail coders responded in the most consistent way to the individual level
of the Jehn (1995) construct. For example, the relationship conflict item used
for the coder ratings was framed very directly to improve construct validity
(see Appendix 1). Coders rated each question in the Appendix for each e-
mail, implying that each e-mail was given a unique score for the degree to
which the individual sending the e-mail was engaging in task and relationship
conflict. While e-mails thus could potentially have individuals engaging in
both task and relationship conflict in the same e-mail, the correlation between
the two constructs ($r=.54$ at time 1; $r=.61$ at time 2) is not exceptionally
higher than is normal in past research on group-level task and relationship
conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

We used our interviews with several members of the activist groups
to validate instances coders identified as showing an individual engaging in
conflict. For example, a member who stated in an interview, “I became
convinced that activism can be a vehicle for change because I saw it, I saw it
happen, at least at a small scale here at University X. So it made me more
inclined to speak up and use my voice and resources and talents to make my
voice heard and challenge the structures of Group X” received a high
engagement in task conflict score based on our text analyses and coder ratings
(6.50). In addition to coding, we also used text analysis to assess the level of
individual engagement in task and relationship conflict occurring in the emails. To measure individual engagement in conflict via text analysis, we adapted Jehn’s (1997) keyword lists to code for individual behavioral engagement in relationship conflict and task conflict. For optimal reliability, we excluded a few words from Jehn’s (1997) lists – for our final list of words used as well as their reliability, please see the Appendix. These two measures – text analysis and coder ratings – exhibited high inter-method agreement and thus were standardized and then averaged together to form our final constructs used in analyses. For example, for engagement in relationship conflict, Cohen’s kappa was .94 for the agreement between the two rating types. For full reliability details for both conflict types, please refer to the Appendix at the end of this chapter.

**Conflict tactics.** The operationalization of our influence tactic measures was guided by both existing literature and an initial pretest of the coder questions. While more traditional influence tactic scale items convey a more overt influence attempt (e.g., Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980), we found in our pre-test that coders’ identification of influence tactic usage in email was very heavily influenced by the email context. Because the subtleness underlying influence tactics may not be as visible in email (Barsness & Bhappu, 2004), we made our questions for the coders very direct. We based these questions, as well as our keyword selection, on the definitions of hard, soft, and rational tactics as proposed by Kipnis and Schmit (1985) and the definition of verbal style as proposed by Baker (1990). In addition to providing our coders with the questions as seen in the Appendix, we also discussed the underlying definitions of influence tactics with the coders so that the coders were aware of the overall construct they were looking for in the email context. For example, to assess instances of hard tactics, coders were asked to respond on a scale of 1 to 7 to two questions assessing hard tactics (e.g., Is this person telling others what to do?), with a 7 representing a high usage of hard tactics in the email. For influence tactics, we developed a keyword list for each of the variables based on past research (e.g., Kipnis & Schmidt, 1985) and the language actually used by group members (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To measure verbal style, we utilized a keyword list developed by Baker (1990). All words of this list were included in our final construct. The inter-method agreement for our conflict management tactic measures was
also sufficiently high (see Appendix), thus we standardized and then averaged together the two ratings – text analysis and coder ratings – to form our final conflict management constructs.

**Individual performance.** Because our sample included large, online political-organizing organizations, rather than corporate organizations, we had to adapt our definition of individual performance to the context of such organizations. Therefore, we defined individual performance as the degree to which the member meets the standards of the group, enabling the achievement of both group goals and individual development as a contributing member in ideas and actions. For our measure of this construct, we used two measures – coding and text analysis. In both of these measures, we tried to capture actual role behaviors which reflect our definition of performance. Role behaviors in political-organizing organizations include such things as “getting the organization mentioned in the local newspaper”, “obtaining access for a press release about the organization”, “helping bring about legal change”, “garnering media attention for a specific action”, “participating in rallies or demonstrations”, “being successful in rallies or demonstrations (getting arrested, getting noticed by public, photos in newspaper, mentioned in internet listserves/newspapers, etc.)”, “writing, calling, or visiting a public official”, “making products (flyers, banners, etc)”, “coordinating actions”, “taking on organizational work”, and “helping out with the leadership of the organizations”. The common theme across all of these examples of the different types of role behaviors typifying individual performance in our sample is that they show, as in our definition, that the individual is contributing to organizational goals. In activist organizations, common goals include garnering media attention, as media coverage is a means of making political actions more meaningful (e.g., Oliver & Myers, 1999). Therefore, individual role behaviors such as “obtaining a press release about the organization” or “helping the organization to get in the paper” can be clearly seen as contributing to organizational goals. Measurement of such role behaviors has been considered a reliable way to measure performance in the team or organizational context (e.g., Chen et al., 2007; Welbourne, Johnson, & Erez, 1998).

The first measure we used to assess individual performance was coder ratings done on a scale of 1-7 (7 reflecting high performance) by an
expert rater. This rater was a consultant to activist groups and had in-depth personal knowledge of each of the groups included in our study, having done consulting work for each of the organizations in the study over a period of three years. The expert, who was blind to our hypotheses, based the performance ratings upon the definition we adapted for individual performance in activist groups as being the degree to which the member meets the standards of the group, enabling the achievement of both group goals and individual development as a contributing member in ideas and actions. Such ratings of individual performance are similar to supervisor ratings, which are found more commonly in studies of traditional organizations (e.g., Jehn, 1995).

To ensure the reliability of this measure, we also used a second measure of performance. The second measure we used to assess individual performance was, as described above, obtained from coding done by two raters blind to the hypotheses and the groups who rated the sample of e-mails described above based on to what degree on a scale of 1-7 (7 being high) the individual sending the e-mails met our definition of individual performance. Coders rated the e-mail based on how much they felt the member was contributing to the group. For example, a member offering to help the group accomplish its goals (e.g., to help hang flyers over the weekend for an upcoming rally; to contact the press about the group activities; to organize the collection of signatures for a petition to give to a public official; or to take on some of the organizational work of the organization) would be rated toward the higher end of the performance scale. The ratings of our independent coders of the e-mails showed substantial interrater agreement with a Cohen’s kappa of .73 (Landis & Koch, 1971) and an inter-class correlation coefficient (ICC[1]) of .19 with significant F-test (p<.001), thus showing sufficient justification to average these two ratings together (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). The variables used in the analyses reflect this averaged number.

**Interview data.** In addition to these measurements, we also had interview data with four members active in one or more of the unstructured groups. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with one group member at a time, where we used the answers of the member to guide the structure of the interview. Because these interviews were part of a larger scale study, interviews covered a wide array of constructs. Examples of questions
employed in these semi-structured interviews specifically relevant to this study include “What does your group do?” and “Have any conflicts arisen in this group?”. Examples of other questions used in the interviews for the purpose of the larger data collection include “What is the group trying to accomplish (their mission/goals)?”, “How did you first become interested in being politically active?”, and “What is the extent/nature of your group’s involvement with other political groups (do you work with other groups, what groups, doing what, how often)?”. We used the information obtained in response to these questions to assist in both our operationalization of the variables in this study as well as in the interpretation of our results.

**Controls.** We included four control variables in our study: organizational identification number, total e-mails sent by the member, liking, and gender. We included liking as a control variable because past studies in traditional settings have found that friendship among group members can influence performance outcomes in unstructured groups (Shah & Jehn, 1993), such as in some of the organizational groups in our study. Our measure for liking was obtained with the coder item “Do people in this group seem to like each other?”. Our coders exhibited high reliability for this measure (Cohen’s kappa=.85). We also controlled for gender (this information was obtained from the expert coder members from the groups), total e-mails sent by the member, and organizational identification number (using a dummy variable).

**Causality.** As our data was acquired over three years, we were able to create a time 1 and time 2 variable for each construct in our study, creating two 1.5 year time periods (Koys, 2001; Tekleab, Takeuchi, & Taylor, 2005). Such time periods are commonly used to examine potential causal determinants of individual outcomes in organizations over time (e.g., Chatman, 1991; Tekleab et al., 2005) to assess the effects over time of processes on outcomes. To test our hypotheses, we examined the presence of e-mail conflict, influence tactic usage, and verbal style at time 1 on individual performance at time 2.

**Analysis.** Because our sample contains members of ten different organizational groups, we first checked to see if the presence of the different organizations explained a significant amount of variance in our variables of interest. We computed interclass correlation coefficients, which showed that conflict, influence tactics, and verbal style at Time 1 and individual
performance at Time 2 did not vary between groups (ICCs ranged from .01 to .11, with all F-tests non-significant). This suggests support for conducting our analyses at the individual level of analysis, as well for our proposition that in large online groups, high variation may exist between members in the same group in the degree to which they engage in conflict. However, to ensure that any remaining group level-factors are still accounted for, we do control for organizational identification number to provide a conservative test of our hypotheses.

**Results**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables are shown in Table 1. As seen in the correlation table, individual engagement in task conflict at Time 1 is significantly, positively related to individual performance at Time 1 and marginally positively related to individual performance at Time 2 (1.5 years later). Individual engagement in relationship conflict at Time 1 does not show a significant relationship with individual performance at either Time 1 or Time 2.

In the correlation table, it is also of note that performance at Time 1 is not related to our variables of interest at Time 2, providing some support for the direction of causality proposed in this chapter (Koys, 2001). To test whether individual performance changed significantly between Time 1 and Time 2, we conducted a paired samples t-test. Individual performance did show a significant change between Time 1 and Time 2 ($t = -2.811, p < .01$).

Hypotheses were tested with hierarchical regression analysis. Because our regression includes interaction terms, we centralized our variables before conducting the regression analyses to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). The results are presented in Table 2. In step 1, we entered the control variables. In step 2, we entered the main effects. In step 3, we entered the interactions of individual engagement in conflict with verbal style and the different types of influence tactics. Multicollinearity was not found to be a problem for our analyses. All tolerance statistics exceeded the requirement of .2 and all variance-inflation factors were below 5. To further interpret the moderation in our model, interaction plots were created (Aiken & West, 1991).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Total E-mails Sent per Member</td>
<td>28.00</td>
<td>48.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Engagement in Relationship Conflict (T1)</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Engagement in Task Conflict (T1)</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Verbal Style (T1)</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Soft Tactics (T1)</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.78**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Hard Tactics (T1)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rational Tactics (T1)</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Task-related E-mail (T1)</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Liking (T1)</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Personal-related E-mail (T1)</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Engagement in Relationship Conflict (T2)</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Engagement in Task Conflict (T2)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Verbal Style (T2)</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Soft Tactics (T2)</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Hard Tactics (T2)</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Rational Tactics (T2)</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Task-related E-mail (T2)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Liking (T2)</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Personal-related E-mail (T2)</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Performance (T1)</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Performance (T2)</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.24**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Total E-mails Sent per Member
2. Engagement in Relationship Conflict (T1)
3. Engagement in Task Conflict (T1)
4. Verbal Style (T1)
5. Soft Tactics (T1)
6. Hard Tactics (T1)
7. Rational Tactics (T1)
8. Task-related E-mail (T1)
9. Liking (T1)
10. Personal-related E-mail (T1)  --
11. Engagement in Relationship Conflict (T2)
   \[.01 \quad --\]
12. Engagement in Task Conflict (T2) \[.08 \quad .61^{**} \quad --\]
13. Verbal Style (T2) \[-.03 \quad .50^{**} \quad .45^{**} \quad --\]
14. Soft Tactics (T2) \[.14 \quad .29^{**} \quad .38^{**} \quad .55^{**} \quad --\]
15. Hard Tactics (T2) \[-.02 \quad .32^{**} \quad .34^{**} \quad .44^{**} \quad .47^{**} \quad --\]
16. Rational Tactics (T2) \[-.18 \quad .17 \quad .30^{**} \quad .41^{**} \quad .38^{**} \quad .45^{**} \quad --\]
17. Task-related E-mail (T2) \[.04 \quad .01 \quad .17^{+} \quad .05 \quad .15 \quad .07 \quad .29^{**} \quad --\]
18. Liking (T2) \[-.03 \quad .18^{+} \quad .32^{**} \quad .25^{*} \quad .32^{**} \quad .27^{**} \quad .32^{**} \quad .50^{**} \quad --\]
19. Personal-related E-mail (T2) \[.13 \quad .23^{*} \quad .14 \quad .04 \quad .01 \quad .10 \quad -.42^{**} \quad --\]
20. Performance (T1) \[.29^{**} \quad -.05 \quad -.01 \quad -.08 \quad .03 \quad -.16 \quad -.16 \quad .00 \quad -.03 \quad .05 \quad --\]
21. Performance (T2) \[.07 \quad .20^{*} \quad .27^{**} \quad .15 \quad .13 \quad .01 \quad .05 \quad .13 \quad .17 \quad .01 \quad .03\]

\(^{n=165} \quad ^{*}p < .05 \quad ^{**}p < .01\)
| Step 1 | Liking | .23* |
|        | Gender | -.02 |
|        | Total E-mails Sent | .27 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 1 | -.04 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 2 | -.14 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 3 | -.30 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 4 | -.27 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 5 | -.24 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 6 | -.09 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 7 | -.16 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 8 | -.29 |
|        | Organizational ID Dummy 9 | -.22 |
| R² / Adjusted R² | .13/.02 |
| F | 1.16 |
| Step 2 | Engagement in Task Conflict | .18 |
|        | Engagement in Relationship Conflict | -.09 |
|        | Verbal Style | -.07 |
|        | Soft Tactics | .21 |
|        | Hard Tactics | -.02 |
|        | Rational Tactics | .05 |
| R² / Adjusted R² | .18/.01 |
| F | 1.05 |
| Step 3 | Engagement in Task Conflict * Verbal Style | .72** |
|        | Engagement in Relationship Conflict * Verbal Style | -.87** |
|        | Engagement in Task Conflict * Soft Tactics | -.32 |
|        | Engagement in Task Conflict * Hard Tactics | -.10 |
|        | Engagement in Task Conflict * Rational Tactics | -.35* |
|        | Engagement in Relationship Conflict * Soft Tactics | .56* |
|        | Engagement in Relationship Conflict * Hard Tactics | .29 |
|        | Engagement in Relationship Conflict * Rational Tactics | .48*** |
| R² / Adjusted R² | .31/.18 |
| F | 2.33** |
| Δ F | 1.12** |
| Δ R² | .14** |

*Standardized regression coefficients are shown.  ***p < .001  **p < .01  *p < .05*
Our first two hypotheses stated that the degree of individual engagement in task conflict would be positively related to individual performance, and that the degree of individual engagement in relationship conflict would be negatively related to individual performance. As can be seen in Table 2, neither hypothesis was supported within our full regression model. However, as seen in Table 1, individual engagement in task conflict at Time 1 does have a marginally significant positive relationship with performance at Time 2 (1.5 years later).

We did find support for our moderating hypotheses. Our third set of hypotheses proposed that strong verbal style would moderate the effects of individual engagement in conflict on individual performance. Strong verbal style had a significant interaction with individual engagement in relationship conflict on performance ($\beta = -.87, p < .01$) and a significant interaction with individual engagement in task conflict on performance ($\beta = .72, p < .01$). Consistent with our hypothesis, when strong verbal style was used, individual engagement in task conflict was more positively related to individual performance. When weak verbal style was used, individual engagement in task conflict appeared negatively related to individual performance. However, for individual engagement in relationship conflict, individual engagement in relationship conflict was actually more positively related to individual performance when verbal style was weak and more negatively related to individual performance when verbal style was strong. The interaction plots for these two interactions are seen in Figures 1 and 2.
Our fourth set of hypotheses proposed that the use of soft tactics would moderate the effects of individual conflict engagement on performance. Hypotheses 4a was supported with a significant interaction with soft tactics and individual engagement in relationship conflict on individual performance ($\beta = .56$, $p < .05$). An interaction plot, as seen in Figure 3, showed support for our hypothesis. When soft tactic usage was high,
relationship conflict engagement appeared most positively linked to individual performance. When soft tactic usage was low, relationship conflict engagement appeared negatively related to individual performance. Hypothesis 4b was not supported.

**Figure 3. The effects of individual engagement in relationship conflict and soft tactics usage on individual performance**

![Graph showing the effects of individual engagement in relationship conflict and soft tactics usage on individual performance.](image)

Our fifth set of hypotheses predicted that the use of rational tactics would moderate the effects of individual engagement in each of the conflict types. Hypothesis 5a was supported, as there was a significant interaction between rational tactics and individual engagement in relationship conflict ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). Consistent with our hypothesis, a fan-shaped interaction was revealed (as seen in Figure 4), such that when rational tactic usage was high, individual engagement in relationship conflict appeared to be positively related to performance. However, when rational tactic usage was low, individual engagement in relationship conflict appeared to be negatively related to individual performance. For Hypothesis 5b, there was a significant interaction between individual engagement in task conflict and rational tactics ($\beta = -.35, p < .05$). However, as seen in Figure 5, when rational tactic usage was low, individual engagement in task conflict was the most positively associated with individual performance. When rational tactic usage was high, individual engagement in task conflict appeared negatively associated with individual performance.
Our sixth, and last, set of hypotheses proposed that hard tactics would moderate the effects of individual engagement in conflict. We did not find an effect of hard tactics on the relationship between individual engagement in task or relationship conflict and performance.
Discussion

Our longitudinal, multi-method field study on the individual-level effects and moderators of individual engagement in conflict offers new insight into a traditional organizational process. Past conflict research has often assumed that conflict is a group level phenomenon (c.f. Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al., 2006) and overlooked the fact that conflict may often stem from certain individuals choosing to engage in conflict. We found in this chapter that how individuals behave while engaging in conflict may differentially affect their individual performance outcomes. Our study thus adds to the existing conflict literature by acknowledging this discrepancy between theory and reality, and by providing a first examination of the consequences of conflict engagement at the individual level.

Our findings show that how individuals behave while engaging in conflict may determine how their engagement in either task or relationship conflict affects their individual performance. We thus extend past research on conflict (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995) and conflict communication and management (Brett et al., 1988; De Dreu et al., 2001; Lovelace et al., 2001) by showing that the interaction of conflict type and conflict management strategy can have important implications for how individuals perform. Specifically, we found that a particular set of conflict tactics – namely, verbal style and influence tactics - could be successfully used to manage relationship and task conflicts. The most effective influence strategy depended on the conflict type. We found that engagement in task conflict, but not relationship conflict, was more positively related to individual performance when members used strong verbal style– i.e. when members sent task-related emails that were clear and with correct grammar. Such clear language may have improved the clarity of the message to other members, which would have improved the feedback the member got from them and the individual’s understanding of the task at hand. We also found that engagement in task conflict was more positively related to individual performance when members used a low level of rational tactics – i.e. the member was not overly analytical or didactical. This could be because emails about the task are already fairly rational work related, and when they are coupled with extreme
structure and order, they may come across as too didactical. That would then reduce the acceptance of the message by others.

In contrast, we found that engagement in relationship conflict was more positively related to performance when members used high levels of rational tactics. This means that when members expressed conflictual opinions about interpersonal matters, logical, structured e-mails were the most effective. This could be because when discussing interpersonal differences, which by nature are more subjective and irrational, the application of logic and structure may be more useful in bringing structure to what may be a more unstructured-issue than task-related matters. Additionally, we found that it was important when engaging in relationship conflict to use soft tactics – i.e. to clearly communicate the relationship is important. This may help soften the message being expressed and show that while interpersonal differences may exist, the relationship still matters. These findings extend past work by showing that the tactics with which individuals deal with conflict may shape how their engagement in task and relationship conflicts affects their individual performance. These findings extend past conflict research, which has called for the better integration of conflict tactic research with conflict type research (e.g., Weingart & Jehn, 2000), by showing that the appropriateness of certain conflict management tactics may depend on the topic the conflict is about.

Our findings also extend past conflict management research (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Brett et al. 1998; Deutsch, 1973; De Dreu et al., 2001; Lovelace et al., 2001; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Rahim & Magner, 1995) by providing a set of tactics from which organizational members can pick and use when engaging in conflict, irrespective of their personal style (i.e. cooperative or competitive). We suggest that this differs from past thinking on conflict management by providing a toolbox of conflict tactics for managers that can be used independently of motive or personality type. Such a tool box allows managers the opportunity to incorporate broader situational concerns when choosing how to handle conflicts. For example, managers could choose to use soft tactics when caught in a conflict where signaling appreciation for the other person is important. By being able to choose tactics to match broader situational concerns, rather than just personality or the interest to cooperate or compete in the situation, managers may be able to more affectively address conflicts in their teams.
Limitations and Future Research

While we did find conflict management tactics to moderate the effects of conflict on individual performance, we did not find main effects of individual engagement in either conflict type on performance. However, it is of note that in the correlation analyses (see Table 1), individual engagement in task conflict is positively related to performance at Time 1, and marginally positively related to performance at Time 2. These correlations raise the possibility that individuals engaging in task conflict (as opposed to relationship conflict) might reap performance benefits from their engagement in this more work-related form of conflict. This adds to the debate of whether task conflict can be good or bad (c.f. De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) by suggesting that individuals engaging in task conflict may reap performance benefits, irrespective of whether or not the group does. This also suggests that further investigation of the effects of task conflict would benefit from a more multi-level perspective that investigates both the individual- and group-level effects of task conflict.

The context in this study is a specific context – namely, large online discussion groups. Such a contextualized setting may offer important insights for the larger organizational behavior field. In their seminal article, Heath and Sitkin (2001) stressed the importance of contextualized studies which examine behaviors central to the organizing process, such as conflict. They posit that insights gained in a somewhat unique context about essential behaviors for organizing can offer general insights about organizing. Therefore, the study of conflict in this unique context could be seen as a contribution of this study. However, it is still important in future research to investigate whether our findings are indeed also applicable to other settings, such as to smaller groups or groups interacting primarily face-to-face. For example, research has suggested that large group dynamics may differ from small group dynamics in terms of member participation (e.g., Fleishman, 1980; Jones, 1984; Williams, Harkins, & Latane, 1981), justice perceptions (Colquitt & Jackson, 2006; Colquitt, Noe, & Jackson, 2002) and group performance (Gooding & Wagner, 1985). Additionally, while research suggests that in groups working together over time, such as those in this study, groups are able to adapt to online communication media and develop interaction patterns matching those they
employ face-to-face (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Markus, 1994; McGinn & Croson, 2004; Ocker & Yaverbaum, 1999) and other research has found no significant differences to exist in conflict behaviours in situations occurring face-to-face or virtually (Galinsky & Mussweiler, 2001), future research would also benefit from investigating individual engagement in conflict across different forms of communication media.

Lastly, the focus of this study was on the consequences of individual conflict engagement. We found that conflict engagement may have important consequences for individual outcomes. It would be interesting for future research to compare these effects to those that result from the mere perception of conflict. For example, we can imagine that both individuals who perceive a conflict and do not engage as well as individuals who perceive the conflict and do decide to engage would feel frustrated as a result of the conflict. However, the individual who engages in the conflict might come to feel less frustrated as a result of voicing his or her opinion and would be better able to perform well. Investigation of the potential differences between conflict perception and conflict engagement would be an interesting pathway for future research. It would also be important to identify the factors which cause an individual who has perceived a conflict to decide to behaviorally engage in the conflict. This would build upon the classic work of Pondy (1967) in which he identified conflict perception as a separate conflict phase preceding conflict behaviour, or manifest conflict, by showing how and why conflicts may progress from one phase to another.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, our longitudinal, multi-method field study offers insight into the concept of individual conflict engagement. Through the use of clear (but not didactical) language in task debates and the use of flattery and logic during relationship conflicts, managers can effectively control how their engagement in either task or relationship conflicts impacts their individual performance. The implications of our findings can be put to use by anyone engaging in a conflict. By using carefully crafted conflict tactics, managers can influence the conflict process to increase their individual performance.
Chapter 3 Appendix

Scale Summary – Coder Question and Keywords

**Individual Engagement in Task Conflict:**
1. Does this person seem to engage in task conflict within this team?
   Text Analyses Keywords: From Jehn 1997: *differ, disagree, discuss, ends, generate, goals, ideas, negotiate, opinion, perspective, task, viewpoint, work*¹
   For coders: Cohen’s kappa = .95; For text analysis and coding: Cohen’s kappa = .94, α = .78

**Individual Engagement in Relationship Conflict:**
1. Does this person seem to engage in personal conflict within this team?
   Text Analyses Keywords: From Jehn 1997: *backstabbing, banter, barb, bicker, complain, conflict, destroy, destructive, difficult, disgruntled, dislike, disrupt, enemy, fault, fight, friend, grumbling, hindrance, personal, personality, pressure, problem, relationship, social, trouble* (bold words included in final construct)
   For coders: Cohen’s kappa = .95; For text analysis and coding: Cohen’s kappa = .79, α = .73

**Verbal Style:**
1. Does this person try to make himself/herself understood by others?
2. This e-mail is very clear.
3. Does this person have good language skills?
   Text Analyses Keywords: *well, like, mean, you know, maybe, perhaps, would, could, might, something, somewhere, interesting* (Baker, 1990)
   For coders: Cohen’s kappa = .96; For text analysis and coding: Cohen’s kappa = .80, α = .88

**Rational Tactics:**
1. Does this e-mail seem to be sharing information with the team?

¹ bold words included in final construct
2. Does this e-mail seem to be providing important information for the team?
3. Does this e-mail seem to be providing knowledge for the team?
Text Analyses Keywords: event, action, call, forward, www
For coders: Cohen’s kappa = .88; For text analysis and coding: Cohen’s kappa = .77, α = .77

**Hard Tactics:**
1. Does this person seem to be giving a direction/instruction/order?
2. Is this person telling others what to do?
Text Analyses Keywords: now, must, have to, cc
For coders: Cohen’s kappa = .88; For text analysis and coding: Cohen’s kappa = .81, α = .74

**Soft Tactics:**
1. Does this person sound like he/she is trying to please someone?
2. Does this person sound like he/she wants the sender(s) to like him/her?
Text Analyses Keywords: please, just, you, thank (you)
For coders: Cohen’s kappa = .96; For text analysis and coding: Cohen’s kappa = .80, α = .79