Hierarchy Conflict: Causes, Expressions, and Consequences

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Abstract. Hierarchy conflict, a dispute among members over the rank order of influence in the team, often impairs team processes and outcomes. The current literature often operates from the assumption that self-interest must be high when team members engage in hierarchy conflict. Building on interdependence theory, we propose that hierarchy conflict may also occur when members have a more prosocial motivation, leading to a more constructive expression of the hierarchy conflict and to more positive effects on team performance than hierarchy conflict instigated by members with a more proself-motivation. Specifically, we argue that the extent to which a team member is more driven by prosocial (versus proself) motivation heightens the threshold and lowers the frequency for engaging in a hierarchy conflict and that more prosocially motivated team members express their challenge of the hierarchy more directly and with less intensity than more proself-motivated members. This sets in motion a hierarchy conflict exchange that is more constructive and helps teams perform better, compared with hierarchy conflict instigated by proself-motivation. Our theory complements and extends the current study of the causes, expressions, and consequences of hierarchy conflict in teams across multiple levels of analysis and helps redirect the focus of how hierarchy conflict is viewed in the literature.
Hierarchy Conflict: Causes, Expressions, and Consequences

Hierarchical differentiation, which reflects differences between team members in their possession of socially valued resources, is one of the defining characteristics of teams (e.g., Bendersky and Shah 2012, Greer et al. 2018, Hollenbeck et al. 2012). Hierarchical differentiation creates an influence structure in which team members vary in the extent to which they depend on each other and are able to impact team behavior and outcomes of the team and its members (e.g., Blau 1964, Bunderson et al. 2016, Harrison and Klein 2007, Magee and Galinsky 2008). Given the value that can be attributed to influence (Anderson et al. 2015, Halevy et al. 2011), people may engage in hierarchy conflict, defined as disputes among members over the rank order of influence in the team (Bendersky and Pai 2018, Greer et al. 2017). For instance, junior team members in a consulting team may fight one another for informal recognition within the team to accelerate their rise in the company’s hierarchy. Hierarchy conflict represents a challenge for teams in that the empirical evidence predominantly points to its negative effects: hierarchy conflict has been associated with lower information exchange, decision-making quality, and overall team performance (e.g., Antino et al. 2019, Spoelma and Ellis 2017, Yu et al. 2023).

According to the current state of the science, team members engage in hierarchy conflict due to factors speaking to self-interested concerns: the opportunity for advancement (when in a low position), the (potential) threat to one’s position (when in a high position), and the saliency of the position in the hierarchy (see reviews by Bendersky and Pai 2018, Greer et al. 2017, Pettit and Marr 2020). Importantly, this self-concern runs counter to the purported function of hierarchical differentiation—to motivate team members to cooperate and act in the collective interest (Halevy et al. 2011, Magee and Galinsky 2008, Morgeson et al. 2010, van Vugt and Ronay 2013)—and is counterproductive in achieving long-term team goals. The interdependent nature of social hierarchies, which should promote collective action, and the focus on self-concern as driving hierarchy conflict show strong parallels with what arguably is the primary motivational tension in teamwork: the tension between ensuring team members act in the collective interest and the drive to act in self-interest, which may often come at the expense of the collective interest (e.g., diverting team resources away from team pursuits in the interest of individual...
pursuits, Kelley and Thibaut 1978, Komorita and Parks 1995, McClintock and Liebrand 1988, Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Given the large body of research that has examined this tension, the exclusive focus of hierarchy conflict research on self-interested motives is surprising. This gives rise to the question whether self-serving motivation is the sole driver of hierarchy conflict or whether hierarchy conflict can also flow from a motivation to serve the team interest, and if so, how this might change the occurrence, expression, and effects of hierarchy conflict in teams.

Our goal is to unpack the socially motivated microfoundations of hierarchy conflict to understand how prosocial and proself motivation may alter how hierarchy conflict occurs and influences team outcomes. We anchor our analysis in interdependence theory—a foundational theory explaining conflict and cooperation in interdependent teams (Kelley and Thibaut 1978)—to develop our multilevel theoretical framework, which predicts how hierarchy conflict is initiated and unfolds over time depending on whether the instigator is more proself-motivated – driven by an interest to expend effort to maximize one’s own outcomes (De Dreu et al. 2008) – or more prosocially motivated – driven by an interest to expend effort to maximize collective outcomes (De Dreu et al. 2008). The theory we propose holds that when hierarchy conflict is instigated by a prosocially motivated team member, it has the potential to lead to greater cooperation and better performance by the team, whereas a hierarchy conflict that is initiated by a proself-motivated team member is likely to lead to intrateam competition and poor performance, consistent with the current state of the literature. The core of our argument is that the different goals that a prosocially motivated team member pursues, compared to a proself-motivated team member (i.e., collective goals vs self-focused goals), affect when and how a hierarchy conflict is initiated, affect the constructiveness of the conflict exchange, and affect the extent to which other team members act in the interest of the team. Our theory outlines the processes involved at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and team levels of analysis when hierarchy conflict is driven by proself versus prosocial motivation. Our conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

Our theoretical framework explaining the impact of the motivational basis of hierarchy conflict on team dynamics and outcomes contributes to research on hierarchy conflict in a number of ways. First,
drawing on interdependence theory (Kelley and Thibaut 1978), we challenge implicit assumptions in the hierarchy conflict literature that hierarchy conflict is inherently self-interested (Bendersky and Hays 2017, Bendersky and Pai 2018, Greer et al. 2017, Pettit and Marr 2020) and provide an account of the causes, expressions, and consequences of hierarchy conflict grounded in a microfoundational theory. Our theory challenges the predominant narrative in the literature (cf. Greer et al. 2017) that hierarchy conflict needs to be avoided at all costs. Our framework suggests that hierarchy conflict sparked by prosocial motivation may even improve team functioning because it increases the information and perspectives considered in the team and nudges team members to cooperate with each other. We develop this insight by building on conflict expression theory (Weingart et al. 2015) and its core notion that the same conflict type may be expressed in different ways, to articulate how hierarchy conflict is expressed as a function of social motivation. This allows us to develop theory to explain that the way hierarchy conflict behaviors are enacted vary based on the whether the motivation for the hierarchy conflict is more prosocial or more proself. Finally, our theory speaks to when hierarchy conflict that is more proself- or prosocially motivated is more likely to occur. As such, our theory sheds light on why the negative effects of hierarchy conflict are observed more frequently in the literature, and on the conditions under which hierarchy conflict that is prosocially motivated may occur, allowing teams to reap the potential benefits of hierarchy conflict. Our theory extends the current study of the causes, expressions, and consequences of hierarchy conflict in teams and helps redirect the focus of how hierarchy conflict is viewed in the literature.

Hierarchy Conflict

Our definition of hierarchy conflict is closely aligned with the definition of status conflict, which focuses on disputes over relative status positions in a team’s hierarchy (Bendersky and Hays 2012), and broadens the content of the dispute to be about all types of influence rank orders in teams, or hierarchies. This follows from the broad definition of hierarchy as “vertical differences between members in their possession of socially valued resources” (Greer et al. 2018: 591). In a social hierarchy, higher-ranking
members have greater influence to shape team decisions and actions than lower-ranking team members (Bunderson et al. 2016, Emerson 1962, Magee and Galinsky 2008, Simpson et al. 2012). Influence is therefore potentially attractive because it gives a team member greater leeway over the direction of the team (Bunderson et al. 2016), to use for whatever their goals may be – prosocial or proself.

Influence has commonly been studied as stemming from differences between team members in power—the “asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations” (Magee and Galinsky, 2008: 361), such as time, money, and knowledge; and from differences in status—“the extent to which an individual or group is respected or admired by others” (Magee and Galinsky, 2008: 359). While research has differentiated the effects of power and status for individual behavior (e.g., Anicich et al. 2016, Blader et al. 2016, Blader and Chen 2012), team-level differences between power and status hierarchies have been shown to be less robust (for a meta-analysis, see Greer et al. 2018). We therefore follow the precedent of other scholars who focus on the umbrella construct of hierarchical differentiation in a team (Bunderson et al. 2016, Wellman et al. 2020, Yu et al. 2019) to also define hierarchy conflict as an umbrella concept capturing the literature’s current examination of both power struggles (Greer and Van Kleef 2010) and status conflict (Bendersky and Hays 2012). Our focus here is to develop integrative theory about hierarchy conflict and theorizing about when, why, and how hierarchy conflict unfolds to enhance explanatory power and parsimony in both power struggle and status conflict research (Newman et al. 2016).

We leverage the foundational work of Bendersky and Hays (2012), which demonstrated that status conflict explained additional variance in team performance, over and above task, relationship, and process conflict, to theorize about hierarchy conflict as distinct from other types of conflict in teams (e.g., task and relationship). Other research supports the independence of status conflict from task conflict. For instance, Lee et al. (2018) found a correlation of $r = .33$ between task conflict and status conflict, which was much lower than the correlation between task conflict and relationship conflict of $r = .59$ in the same sample. Antino et al. (2019) found a correlation of $r = .46$ between status conflict and a generic team conflict measure (comprised of both task and relationship conflict items). Together, these studies provide
empirical evidence for the independence of hierarchy conflict from task conflict.

Hierarchy conflict has received extensive empirical scrutiny in recent years. Greer and Van Kleef (2010) were among the first to demonstrate the negative effects of power struggles, demonstrating that teams embroiled in a power struggle were less likely to reach integrative solutions to their conflict. Power struggles were particularly likely in hierarchically differentiated, high-power teams, because the hierarchical differentiation highlighted differences in a resource these team members valued greatly: power. Bendersky and Hays (2012) demonstrated the negative effects of status conflict, showing that it reduced team performance through reduced information exchange and active withholding of information. Team members fought for greater influence by asserting competence, legitimacy, and dominance, devaluing others’ contributions and inflating their own, and involving others as allies or bystanders. Bendersky and Hays (2012) argued that status conflict was uniquely competitive and detrimental (compared with task, relationship, and process conflict), because of its long-term implications for patterns of deference and dominance. Moreover, status conflict likely implicates all team members because it can involve the entire set of social relationships in the team and because it is based on a zero-sum structural resource. Together, these papers on power struggles and status conflict launched the current focus in the literature on hierarchy conflict, which takes a predominantly negative and self-interested view of such conflicts.

Indeed, the negative impact of hierarchy conflict, captured as both status conflicts and power struggles, on team performance has since been replicated in a variety of studies across different settings (Antino et al. 2019, Franke et al. 2022, Swaab et al. 2014, Yu et al. 2023). Hierarchy conflicts have been associated with reduced information exchange (Spoelma and Ellis 2017), lower psychological safety (De Hoogh et al. 2015, Lee et al. 2018), and more competitive behaviors that prevent integrative win-win solutions (van Bunderen et al. 2018). These processes and emergent states give rise to less support from leaders for new ideas (Urbach and Fay 2018), poorer decision-making quality (Spoelma and Ellis 2017), less team creativity (Lee et al. 2018), lower sales output (De Hoogh et al. 2015), and worse team performance (Chun and Choi 2014, Yu et al. 2023). A notable exception to these studies portraying
negative consequences for team outcomes comes from Bendersky and Hays (2017), who found that status conflict can benefit team outcomes when it helps clarify a team’s status hierarchy.

Scholars have reasoned that hierarchy conflict leads to negative outcomes because it predisposes team members to reallocate resources from the team to the self, to avoid loss of, or to enhance, one’s position (Case et al. 2018, Maner and Mead 2010, Pettit et al. 2010). For example, status conflict is reasoned to have these overall negative outcomes because the perceived opportunity to move up in a team hierarchy and the threat posed to the top by this mutability of status rank motivates team members to fight to protect or to improve their individual ranks within the team (Bendersky and Pai 2018, Case et al. 2018, Hays and Bendersky 2015, Maner and Mead 2010, Mead and Maner 2012). Similarly highlighting the importance of one’s own position, Greer and colleagues (2017) argued that power struggles stem from a combination of power sensitivity—the excessive care that members have for their own position in a team—and perceived threats to their power. This focus on self-interested concerns is also reflected in the motives and behaviors that research has examined as leading to hierarchy conflict. Research has emphasized traits like self-interest (Loch et al. 2000) and need for power (Chun and Choi 2014, Franke et al. 2022) as antecedents of hierarchy conflict. Furthermore, scholars have focused on conditions that create threats to individual ranks both from within the team (Antino et al. 2019, Greer and Van Kleef 2010) and from external sources such as inter-team pressures (van Bunderen et al. 2018, Spoelma and Ellis 2017), as well as situations that enhance the likelihood of social comparison processes between intrateam ranks, such as introducing highly similar new team members (Boroumand et al. 2018) and social hierarchies that emphasize small differences in positions between members (or “ladder” hierarchies; Yu et al. 2019). Thus, the tenor in hierarchy conflict research is that it stems from self-interested motives and therefore negatively impacts team outcomes.

Despite this seeming consensus about motives for hierarchy conflict, there is some suggestive evidence to the contrary, Schouten (2016) interviewed Dutch politicians who described distinct motives for engaging in a conflict over influence within their own political team. In addition to the aforementioned motives for power and status, these politicians also named reasons such as the ability to
better realize ideals and their values or vision as reasons why they would engage in a conflict with their own party members for more influence in their team. These reasons demonstrate motives for engaging in a hierarchy conflict other than to advance self-interested goals. Furthermore, Chang et al. (2017) offer suggestive evidence that a focus on team goals or personal goals changes how status is pursued in a team. While the pursuit of status is broader than hierarchy conflict, this research informs that when status concerns are salient and a team member’s task is able to advance the team’s standing relative to other teams (generating a team benefit), the member will behave more cooperatively towards other team members, whereas when a team member’s task activity does not impact the team’s relative standing, the member will behave more competitively to advance the own status within the team. Together, these studies suggest that multiple motives for hierarchy conflict exist and that motive matters for how team members go about improving their standing.

**Social Motivation and Hierarchy Conflict**

While we do not argue with the notion that self-interested motives influence hierarchy conflict, we challenge the implicit proposition that hierarchy conflicts are *only* instigated from a motivation to serve a person’s own position and goals. We integrate insights from interdependence theory to argue that hierarchy conflict can also be instigated to serve team interests – that hierarchy conflict can be instigated by those high in prosocial motivation. For example, in a management team, the business unit lead of North America could challenge the resources being allocated by the CFO to the South American business unit because they genuinely want the company to thrive, and they believe the company as a whole may perform better in the long run if more resources are given to North America.

Interdependence theory addresses a core question in mixed-motive situations, which is focused on fostering cooperation in interdependent teams where a fundamental tension exists between self-interest and collective interest (Kelley and Thibaut 1978, Komorita and Parks 1995, McClintock and Liebrand 1988, Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Team members may pursue their own self-interested goals at the expense of the team’s goals, but there are also opportunities for team members to pursue collective, or team, goals (De Dreu and Carnevale 2003, Pruitt and Rubin 1986). This is consistent with the tension that exists in
hierarchically differentiated teams, where the interdependence between team members should incentivize team-oriented behaviors but the benefits of influence for the self may motivate personal goal pursuit. Expanding the motives considered to drive hierarchy conflict has the potential to generate new insights and research questions regarding the expressions and consequences of hierarchy conflict. Considering hierarchy conflicts that are prosocially motivated challenges the predominantly negative views on hierarchy conflict and allows us to articulate a pathway by which hierarchy conflict may benefit team performance.

Interdependence theory perceives the pursuit of self-interest (proself motivation) as normative behavior, while any pursuit of collective goals is the function of the underlying motives of the individual (prosocial motivation) or of situational constraints or opportunities (Rusbult and Van Lange 2008). Only situations in which team members have conflicting interests, such as the mixed-motive situations present in teams, allow for the expression of cooperation versus competition, and thus for the expression of prosocial motivation. After all, when interests are aligned, team members can act in their self-interest to achieve the common goal. It is critical to note that in situations of mixed-motive interdependence, on average, all team members are better off when everyone pursues the collective interest than when everyone pursues self-interest. Conversely, team member’s self-interest is served best when the team member advances personal goals, while all other team members pursue the collective goals. A team member’s focus on the collective interest thus comes with the challenge that it only leads to positive outcomes to the extent that other team members also focus on the collective. Key in the interdependence theory conceptualization of prosocial motivation is that this is a concern with collective interests—the interests of a collective of which the self is a part—and not a concern with the interests of others, which is better conceptualized as altruism. In this mixed-motive interdependence understanding of proself and prosocial motivation, these motivations refer to two different positions on a continuum such that a stronger proself motivation by definition means a weaker prosocial motivation, and vice versa (Beersma and De Dreu 2002, McClintock and Liebrand 1988).

Social motivation (i.e., proself or prosocial motivation) can both stem from relatively stable,
dispositional traits and be influenced by situational or contextual variables (Bolino and Grant 2016). The dominant perspective on trait-based social motivation in an interdependence context is that of social value orientation (Van Lange et al. 1997). Social value orientation is generally seen as an individual difference factor which provides stable preferences for patterns of outcomes between oneself and others across situations (Van Lange et al. 1997). Contextual or situational factors influencing an individual’s social motivation are more specific to the situation at hand and can operate at different levels of analysis. These situational factors can temporarily induce a greater proself or prosocial motivation. For instance, proself motivation can be heightened for an individual when a negotiator sets aspirational goals (Druckman 1994) or someone frames future outcomes as losses rather than gains (Brewer and Kramer 1986). A team’s reward structure rewarding collective performance has been demonstrated to lead to more prosocial motivation, whereas a structure rewarding individual performance creates proself motivation at the team level of analysis (Beersma et al. 2003). Environmental factors external to the team can influence social motivation, such as intergroup competition (Chang et al. 2017, van Bunderen et al. 2018) and organizational culture (Chen et al. 1998). Contextual factors operating at the team or environmental levels can potentially influence the social motivation of multiple members simultaneously, whereas disposition and contextual factors at the individual level solely influence the social motivation of one team member. Thus, contextual factors at higher levels of analysis can create similar social motivation among team members, whereas contextual factors at the individual level may create similar social motivation between members only by chance.

**Individuals’ Social Motivation and Engagement in Hierarchy Conflict**

Social motivation drives team member goals and behaviors, such that the social motivation of a team member includes what this team member hopes to accomplish with the influence accrued through a hierarchy conflict. In other words, social motivation drives why a team member may engage in a hierarchy conflict. A team member with a greater proself motivation will engage in a hierarchy conflict to promote their own goals. For example, they may challenge or interrupt a peer in the team to gain greater respect and recognition from their boss. Because greater influence within the team positions one to better
serve personal needs and outcomes, proself-motivated individuals may perceive hierarchy conflict to be instrumental in the pursuit of such personal needs and outcomes. The more influence one has, the greater one’s ability to direct resources toward satisfying personal goals (Galinsky et al. 2003, 2012). For example, greater influence allows one to direct money and time spent towards personal initiatives rather than for the team’s success (Maner and Mead 2010). Thus, proself motivation may motivate individuals to engage in hierarchy conflict to increase or protect one’s own influence to achieve personal goals.

This is distinct from how prosocial motivation may motivated individuals to engage a hierarchy conflict. The impetus for a team member with a greater prosocial motivation to engage in a hierarchy conflict would stem from the motivation to benefit the team and to expend effort out of concern for the team’s success. One situation that can drive a hierarchy conflict that is prosocially motivated is a team’s actual, anticipated, or perceived failure to meet its goals. Team failure may provide the impetus to want to change the influence structure of the team to benefit the collective team interest, as it signals the need to realign team priorities and associated leadership (Burke et al. 2006, Ilgen et al. 2005). This team failure need not be limited to task performance but may include member interaction and other process or outcome concerns, such as a failure of leadership to promote the well-being of team members (e.g., abusive supervision) or moral failure when a team promotes questionable or unethical behaviors (Barnett and Vaicys 2000, Tepper 2007). As teams operate in temporal cycles of goal-directed activity, feedback about goal performance becomes available during performance episodes (Marks et al. 2001, Weingart 1997, Zaheer et al. 1999) and may thus invite member responses based on experienced or anticipated team failure. As such, team failure in a broad understanding of team goals can trigger a hierarchy conflict out of prosocial motivation to serve collective team interests. A prosocially motivated team member who engages in a hierarchy conflict may do so to claim responsibility for the implementation of an initiative to change the team’s (failing) course and to ensure that the implementation of the initiative is done right to ensure its success.

The critical difference between hierarchy conflict that is more proself versus more prosocially motivated lies in the different goals that a team member seeks to accomplish with the hierarchy conflict.
Note that regardless of whether the conflict is sparked by prosocial motivation or proself motivation, it is hierarchy conflict: conflict about the rank ordering of members’ influence in the team. Our analysis centers on the notion that the conflict type is the same, yet the motivation for the conflict influences the threshold and frequency of the conflict, how the conflict is expressed, and the conflict’s consequences.

**Hierarchy Conflict Threshold and Frequency.** Recognizing that both proself and prosocial motivation can drive hierarchy conflict allows us to understand why the focus on and evidence for hierarchy conflict’s negative effects may be more prevalent. We propose that prosocially motivated team members engage in hierarchy conflict less frequently than proself-motivated team members because the former perceive a higher threshold to engage due to differences in the potential return on investment of the conflict.

Interdependence theory holds that social motivation drives the kind of information that is processed by a team member (De Dreu et al. 2008, Kelley and Thibaut 1978). Specifically, a more prosocially motivated team member processes more team-relevant information about the social environment because of their team orientation. Conversely, a more proself-motivated team member focuses on a narrower set of information cues pertaining to only themselves in the social environment. A more proself-motivated team member is likely to focus on benefits and costs of engaging in a hierarchy conflict for the self. A more prosocially motivated team member is likely to take into account the potential benefits and costs for the self and the team. As a result, a more prosocially motivated member will often perceive a lower return of investment of a hierarchy conflict than a more proself-motivated member.

A cost-benefit analysis of a prosocially motivated team member is likely to include close scrutiny of the value to the team of hierarchical change, such as in the face of an important (anticipated) failure of the team in terms of performance or morality (Barnett and Vaicys 2000). Moreover, the return on investment of the conflict needs to benefit the team without doing too much damage to the focal individual. This may lead to a complex calculation of possible outcomes that include an assessment of the chances of success of a hierarchy change turning things around for the team as well as the chances of the
focal team member winning the conflict, but also the chances of things turning around without any hierarchy conflict (e.g., on their own or by convincing current leadership to change course). Additionally, it will include an assessment of the costs for the team (e.g., the time and resources expended on the conflict; the damage to team member relationships and the impact on team functioning). Critical in this cost-benefit calculation for the more prosocially motivated individual is whether the team gains from the hierarchy conflict. Furthermore, since the focus of a hierarchy conflict that is more prosocially motivated is on team goals, we anticipate that gaining or maintaining one’s own level of influence is subservient to ensuring that the team is headed in the desired direction. As such, when another member gains influence to act in the team’s best interest, there would not be a prosocial motivation to instigate hierarchy conflict.

Conversely, a cost-benefit analysis of a proself-motivated team member is likely to consider the range of potential costs and benefits of a hierarchy conflict as it pertains to the focal team member. This greatly narrows the range of potential costs that will be associated with a hierarchy conflict, as the calculation of costs and benefits is less likely to include costs for the team. For instance, the cost-benefit analysis of proself motivated team member may include the chances of success as well as failure of the hierarchy conflict, and the benefits of success (e.g., what can I actually achieve by gaining influence?; are there other ways to get there?) but also its costs (e.g., what additional tasks will I have to complete when in charge?; what resources am I diverting away from other personally relevant tasks?). Ultimately, the return-on-investment needs only benefit the self. This will likely lower the threshold for engaging in a hierarchy conflict because the costs for the team are less relevant to calculations, while benefits may be easier to access: any rung higher on the hierarchical ladder will lead to an increase in the benefits that flow from greater influence (Anderson et al. 2015, Halevy et al. 2011, Magee and Galinsky 2008). Moreover, others are unlikely to serve this focal team member’s goals unless s/he has the influence to persuade them to that effect. While a hierarchy conflict that is prosocially motivated may be fought on someone else’s behalf, a hierarchy conflict that is proself motivated is unlikely to be fought on behalf of someone else. The pursuit of individual and team goals often depends on scarce team resources (time, materials, support of others), and other team members therefore likely prioritize the pursuit of their own
personal goals or team goals over serving the focal individual’s goal pursuit. Accordingly, the path to personal goal satisfaction for the proself-motivated team member likely runs through one’s own influence in the team. Thus, a more proself-motivated team member will have a lower threshold for engaging in a hierarchy conflict than a more prosocially motivated member.

The logical consequence of this is that hierarchy conflict that is proself-motivated is likely to occur with greater frequency than hierarchy conflict that is prosocially motivated. Team members who might instigate a hierarchy conflict for prosocial reasons will be more open to alternative ways to address the perceived issues in the team (i.e., other than hierarchy conflict), such as other team members stepping into leadership positions to address the problem or a change of course by the current team leadership. On the other hand, more proself-motivated team members will see few alternatives to personal influence in the team to achieve their personal objectives. There will be a higher threshold to engaging in a hierarchy conflict for more prosocially motivated team members as they take into account a wider array of costs and a more uncertain projection of benefits compared with more proself-motivated team members. Thus, based on our theorizing, it is understandable that research has more or less exclusively focused on hierarchy conflict that is proself-motivated and its negative consequences: hierarchy conflict that is proself-motivated is more likely to occur. Thus, we propose as follows:

**Proposition 1.** Prosocial motivation leads to a higher threshold for engaging in hierarchy conflict than proself motivation.

**Interpersonal Hierarchy Conflict Exchange**

Interdependence theory holds that the outcome of an interaction is a function of the needs, thoughts, and motives of both interaction partners within the context of the specific interdependence situation (Rusbult and Van Lange 2008). The needs, thoughts, and motives are often expressed in behaviors. We therefore expect that once a team member has decided that the benefits outweigh the costs of engaging in a hierarchy conflict, social motivation will also affect the behavioral dynamics of the conflict in terms of both the behaviors by the conflict initiator and the subsequent responses to the conflict expression. The remainder of our theorizing focuses on what happens after the threshold to engage in a
conflict has been met. Conflict research has historically focused on the content of the conflict (conflict type; e.g., task, relationship). Recent advances in the conflict literature have highlighted that how a conflict is initially expressed is critical to understanding its behavioral dynamics (e.g., Shah et al. 2021, Weingart et al. 2015). Conflict expression refers to the verbal and nonverbal communication of opposition between people (Laursen and Collins 1994, Peterson 1983). Per conflict expression theory, within a conflict type, the outcomes of the conflict can vary based on how it is expressed. Core to our argumentation is that whether a team member who engages a hierarchy conflict is proself- or prosocially motivated affects the conflict expression.

Our theorizing about hierarchy conflict expression puts at center stage two mechanisms derived from interdependence and conflict expression theory: (i) the extent to which the team member engaging in the hierarchy conflict is proself- or prosocially motivated influences the conflict expression and (ii) the proself- or prosocially motivated conflict expression is likely to be reciprocated (i.e., in kind, even if not with exactly the same behavior). Initial conflict expressions predominantly take place between two team members and do not necessarily involve the entire team (Humphrey et al. 2017, Shah et al. 2021). We therefore focus our theorizing about the impact of social motivation on hierarchy conflict expression at the interpersonal level of analysis. Thus, social motivation shapes the initial hierarchy conflict expression of the initiator. This sets in motion a process of hierarchy conflict responses between the two conflict parties. We argue that the nature of this exchange is critical for how the re-established or re-affirmed hierarchy in the team is perceived (i.e., what social motivation is dominant and valued in the team), which affects subsequent team member behavior.

*Initial Conflict Expression.* Conflict expression theory proposes that conflict expression differs along two key dimensions: oppositional intensity and directness (Weingart et al. 2015). Oppositional intensity describes the extent to which a conflict party communicates their entrenchment in a position and the level of subversiveness of their actions towards another (Weingart et al. 2015). When conflict is expressed with high intensity, conflict expression behaviors signal commitment to one’s own position and are focused on protecting this position (Pruitt and Lewis 1975, Pruitt and Rubin 1986, Weingart et al.
1990). High-intensity conflict expressions are also more likely to be subversive, focused on overturning, overthrowing, and undermining the other party (Weingart et al. 2015). Lower oppositional intensity conflict expression, on the other hand, signal openness to considering the other’s point of view.

Directness refers to the level of explicitness with which opposition is communicated, which describes both the level of ambiguity of the conflict expression and whether the conflict is expressed directly to those involved or to third parties. More direct conflict expressions tend to bring more information to the surface relevant to the resolution of the conflict. An example of a low intensity, direct conflict expression is to clearly state one’s position or perspective on a topic to the opposed party, which is low on ambiguity while leaving room for the other’s point of view, whereas an example of a high intensity, direct conflict expression is to dress down the opposed team member in a public setting, which leaves little room for ambiguity about the intentions to undermine the other party. Indirect conflict expressions allow one to backtrack on the conflict, for instance by stating that it was only a joke or that statements were not meant in a particular way. An example of a high intensity, indirect conflict expression is to provide a sarcastic response to the ideas suggested by the opposed party. Indirect conflict expressions can also be communicated to a third party not directly involved in the conflict, for instance by venting to them. An example of a low intensity, indirect conflict expression is to clearly state opposition to a team member by going to a third party in order to try to gain support for one’s position in a backhanded way. These two dimensions of conflict expression have been identified as independent of one another. However, any conflict expressed with high oppositional intensity will be problematic and disruptive because of the threatening nature of the conflict expressions regardless of the directness in the conflict expression.

Interdependence theory states that in a team setting, a more prosocially motivated team member is concerned with advancing collective interests instead of personal goals. Building on this, prior research in conflict situations has demonstrated that a prosocial motivation gives rise to a more cooperative mindset with a focus on problem solving (Beersma and De Dreu 1999, 2002). A more cooperative mindset enhances the likelihood that a team member is open to the other party’s point of view, which allows for a more constructive exchange of positions (Pruitt and Lewis 1975, Pruitt and Rubin 1986,
These tendencies suggest that a more prosocially motivated team member will express conflict with less oppositional intensity. For instance, conflict statements are likely to involve statements of fact about the team’s performance and the need for change or the potential ways in which the conflict initiator is able to help the team advance its goals over what is currently being done.

Conversely, a more proself-motivated team member is primarily concerned with advancing personal goals, which gives rise to a less cooperative mindset focused on accruing benefits to the self and a potentially more competitive mindset in which it is reasonable to achieve outcomes at the expense of others (Beersma and De Dreu 1999, 2002). This mindset enhances the likelihood that the team member positions him- or herself directly in opposition to another and leaves little room for seeing another’s point of view, which is a hallmark characteristic of oppositional intensity (Beersma and De Dreu 2002, Weingart et al. 2015). Such high-intensity conflict expressions are likely to involve expression of emotions, such as anger and frustration, intimidating posturing, and personal attacks focused on the opposed party, such as statements undermining the credibility of the other party (e.g., questioning someone’s educational qualifications or prior experience) and sarcastic jokes. Thus, the concern of a prosocially motivated team member with the interest of the team will lead to conflict expressions with lower oppositional intensity, whereas the concern of a more proself-motivated team member with their self-interest will lead to conflict expressions with higher oppositional intensity. This leads us to propose:

**Proposition 2a.** Initial hierarchy conflict expression that are more prosocially motivated tend to be lower in oppositional intensity than initial hierarchy conflict expressions that are more proself-motivated.

Moreover, we expect that the focus on problem solving of a team member who is more prosocially motivated and initiates a hierarchy conflict will lead to more direct conflict expressions compared with a more proself-motivated team member who initiates a hierarchy conflict. More direct conflict expressions are characterized by lower ambiguity in the conflict expression. Ambiguous conflict expressions allow for these expressions to be open to multiple interpretations, which lowers the informational value of the conflict expression. More direct conflict expressions, on the other hand, better
clarify the conflict party’s intentions and reasons for opposing, thereby bringing more relevant information to the surface (Weingart et al. 2015). Openly sharing information is associated with more problem solving that has the potential to resolve the conflict (Toma and Butera 2015). Furthermore, a more direct conflict expression clarifies who is opposed by directly addressing them instead of a third party. This limits the risk of other team members misinterpreting the behavior and unintentionally and irreparably becoming involved in the conflict due to misunderstandings. A more prosocially motivated initiator is likely keen to avoid unnecessary casualties of the conflict, as these are more disruptive to the team’s interests. Thus, initial conflict expressions by a prosocially motivated team member are likely characterized by behaviors that introduce clear information. Clear information about the goals and intentions of the prosocially motivated conflict initiator is also likely to lead to greater success in the conflict, as others are more likely to grant influence to prosocially motivated team members than to proself-motivated team members (Willer 2009). By directly communicating the reasons for opposition, the prosocial motivations of this team member are more likely to be noticed by others, which enhances the chances of a successful influence claim. For the prosocially motivated team member to both benefit from the conflict initiation and for its team interests to be served, it is critical that the direct conflict expressions are not perceived as personal attacks but as an attempt to share information that clearly states the problem and the proposed solution.

On the other hand, a conflict initiator who is more proself-motivated is driven to problem solving not in the interest of the team but to benefit their personal goals. Influence is unlikely to be imbued to someone who is intending to advance personal goals (Berger et al. 1980, Willer 2009). That is, whereas prosocial motives to seek influence can be expected to be made explicit, proself motives are likely to be strategically hidden. Low-directness conflict expressions allow for ambiguity in interpreting the message. A more proself-motivated party in the conflict will want to avoid bluntly stating their true intentions, thereby heightening the likelihood of indirect conflict expressions. Of course, exceptions could exist if it strategically may be in the interest of the proself-motivated team member to be more direct for instance by being clear in who is being dressed down in public to show one’s strength. Thus, it is in the interest of
a proself-motivated conflict initiator to generally create ambiguity about their true intentions, however at times, their true colors may of course come out more directly. Overall, this suggests that proself-motivated team members are generally less direct in their conflict expressions, given the general stigma in teams against advocating for a more self-interested position (Willer 2009). In sum, we propose social motivation to impact the degree of directness of initial expressions of hierarchy conflict:

**Proposition 2b.** Initial hierarchy conflict expression that are more prosocially motivated tend to be higher in directness than initial hierarchy conflict expressions that are more proself-motivated.

**Conflict Response.** The initial conflict expression likely provokes a response from the opposed party. We propose that responses to initial conflict expressions tend to be reciprocated in kind, consistent with a tit-for-tat strategy common in situations with repeated, interdependent interactions. In a tit-for-tat behavioral strategy, the cooperativeness of the response of the interaction partner is based on the (perceived) cooperativeness of the behavior to which one is responding (Axelrod 1984, Rusbult and Van Lange 2008). If the initial behavior is perceived to be cooperative, the response, as per tit-for-tat, should also be cooperative. If the initial behavior is seen as competitive, the response should also be competitive. As a result, the reciprocity that emerges in tit-for-tat strategies can be positive, leading to collaborative and trusting relationships, or negative, leading to antagonistic and distrustful relationships (Rusbult and Van Lange 2008). Indeed, social dilemma research sees a strong tendency of people to reciprocate cooperative and non-cooperative behavior (Parks and Rumble 2001). Because interdependence theory assumes proself-motivated behavior as the baseline, it implies more negative tit-for-tat spirals due to the self-interested motives of each interaction party.

We build on the logic of the tit-for-tat strategy to suggest that in a hierarchy conflict the response of the opposed party is likely to reciprocate the behavior of the conflict initiator in kind. That is, reciprocity does not presume showing the exact same behavior, but responding with behavior that falls in the same behavioral class as the other party’s actions. For example, when an initial conflict expression is to discount the opposed party’s perspective – both indirect and highly intense – the response may be to engage in social undermining to third parties – also a form of indirect, highly intense conflict expression.
Similarly, a more fact-based statement of opposition would be met with a similarly lower-intensity, relatively direct conflict response. The reciprocity in the conflict expressions creates a cycle that can have a more competitive or a more cooperative orientation.

It is worthwhile to underscore that also a prosocially motivated conflict expression contains a threat to the position of the person being challenged. Our argument is that the response to this threat will be more constructive, or with lower intensity and/or greater directness, after a more prosocially motivated initial conflict expression. The initiator shows concerns for the collective interests by engaging in more direct, lower intensity conflict expressions. Following the tit-for-tat logic, this should inspire the responding party to reciprocate with similar behavior, which then leads to a conflict response that shows more awareness of the team interests. In sum, we expect that initial conflict expressions are reciprocated in kind, both in terms of intensity and directness, which results in a conflict cycle that is characteristic of behavior that can be expected when the conflict motivation is more proself-motivated or more prosocially motivated.

Proposition 3. Hierarchy conflict expressions invite reciprocity, such that proself or prosocially-motivated conflict expressions are reciprocated in kind.

Receiver Social Motivation. Interdependence theory suggests situational and individual variation in the extent to which a conflict expression is reciprocated, such that a tit-for-tat reciprocation is subject to the receiver’s own social motivation. Thus, we propose that our reciprocity Proposition 3 is moderated by the extent to which the social motivation of the receiver matches the social motivation of the instigator. We argue that when the social motivations of both parties match, the tendency to reciprocate will be amplified. Conversely, when the social motivations of both parties vary, we argue, the tendency to reciprocate will be attenuated.

Interdependence theory suggests that reciprocity in conflict expressions is most likely when the social motivations of the opposed party and the initiator are similar. The conflict interaction is more predictable for both parties when they have the same social motivation as the conflict expression fits with one’s own likely pattern of behavior (Bauer and Green 1996, Wilson et al. 2016). A more prosocially
motivated responding party is more likely to respond in kind to conflict expressions that are prosocially motivated. A more prosocially motivated respondent is more likely to respond in kind to conflict expressions that are proself motivated.

When the responding party’s social motivation and the initiator’s social motivation are dissimilar, responding conflict expressions will be attenuated in their reciprocity. Interdependence theory suggests that the extent of attenuation in reciprocity will be asymmetric depending on whether the responder’s own social motivation is more proself or more prosocial (Kelley and Stahelski 1970). When encountering someone with an opposite social motivation, prosocially motivated responders are more likely than proself-motivated responders to adjust their response. Proself-motivated responses to prosocially motivated behaviors tend to result in more positive outcomes for the self because one is able to take advantage of the work others have done (Balliet et al. 2011, Kelley and Stahelski 1970, Komorita and Parks 1995, Pletzer et al. 2018). Conversely, prosocially motivated responses to proself-motivated behaviors enable the initiator to take advantage of the responder (van Dijk et al. 2013, Van Lange et al. 2013). Thus, it benefits a prosocially motivated responder to adjust their behavior in a proself-motivated direction to avoid being taken advantage of, whereas proself-motivated responders do not as obviously benefit from adjusting their behavior. The risk of being taken advantage of will skew prosocially motivated responders towards conflict expressions that are proself-motivated, whereas proself-motivated responders will be more likely to respond with conflict expressions that are more proself-motivated to both ends of the perceived social motivation spectrum (Schlenker and Goldman 1978).

Recent meta-analytic evidence nuances this general statement somewhat and shows that proself-motivated responders do also adjust their behavior somewhat in a prosocially motivated direction when encountering someone with the opposite social motivation. However, this shift towards prosocial behavior by a more proself-motivated responder is smaller than the shift that more prosocially motivated responders make when responding to more proself-motivated behavior (Pletzer et al. 2018). This means that the responder’s social motivation will be a stronger determinant of their responding conflict expression when the initiator is prosocially motivated than when the initiator is proself-motivated.
Behaviorally, interdependence theory suggests that when responders are more prosocially motivated, they are more likely to adopt a tit-for-tat-plus-one strategy, also referred to as a generous strategy (Rusbult and Van Lange 2008). In this response pattern, the responder offers some grace to the conflict initiator, such that conflict expressions that are highly intense or more indirect are not immediately responded to with similarly high-intensity or low-directness conflict expressions, but rather with behavior that is less intense and more direct. Then, if a second conflict expression is similarly intense or indirect, the responding party responds in kind. This strategy is particularly beneficial in situations with informational uncertainty, where true motives are not immediately known (Klapwijk and Van Lange 2009), and is likely to promote cooperative behavior (Rusbult and Van Lange 2008).

In sum, we expect the extent of reciprocity in conflict expressions to be influenced by the responder’s social motivation, such that when social motivations are similar, conflict expression reciprocity is amplified. However, when social motivations are dissimilar, conflict expression reciprocity is attenuated and this attenuation is asymmetric, such that prosocially motivated individuals will adjust their behavior to a greater degree in a proself-motivated direction than vice versa. This is particularly important in order to predict the emergence of more prosocially motivated conflict exchanges.

**Proposition 4.** Social motivation of the responding party interacts with the social motivation of the initiating party to predict reciprocity of conflict expressions, such that when social motivation is similar reciprocity is amplified, whereas reciprocity is attenuated when social motivation is dissimilar.

**Consequences of Hierarchy Conflict for the Team**

Hierarchy conflict has been clearly established in the literature to have an impact beyond the specific parties involved in the competition for greater influence. We propose that when prosocial motivation for engaging in the hierarchy conflict is higher, hierarchy conflict will be more positive for team outcomes than when the hierarchy conflict is engaged in from a more proself-motivation.

**Conflict Spillover.** A hierarchy conflict is fought to either re-align or re-affirm the hierarchy in a team with the goal to settle who has how much influence—for the time being. Due to the zero-sum,
interdependent nature of social hierarchies (Magee and Galinsky 2008), we expect team members who are not core to the conflict, or bystanders, to take an interest in the outcome of the conflict because it is likely to have implications for them (Bendersky and Hays 2012). As such, hierarchy conflict, more than other types of conflict, may be prone to spill over to other team members.

Interdependence theory grants significant weight to the perceptions of others’ motives in determining one’s own course of action in addition to actual social motives (McClintock and Liebrand 1988): taken into account is not only the objective pay-off structure when deciding how to respond in a mixed-motive situation but also how one perceives others in the situation and expects them to respond. Thus, consistent with our theorizing so far, we anticipate that other team members’ perceptions of the social motives of the conflict parties is shaped by their conflict expressions. These social motives will tell the bystanders whether this team values more self-focused or more team-oriented behaviors. When the conflict expressions put self-interested motives front and center, this signals to bystanders that looking out for oneself, hoarding resources, and hiding information are acceptable team member behaviors. Conversely, when the conflict expressions put prosocial motives front and center, this signals to bystanders that openly discussing decisions, sharing resources, and supporting each other are acceptable team behaviors. These messages are particularly strong when the top of the hierarchy is re-aligned or reaffirmed with those who strongly express their social motivation (Bandura 1977). We suggest that the bystander uses how the conflict is expressed—as more proself-motivated or more prosocially motivated—as one means to infer if the sender is more proself-motivated or more prosocially motivated. This information enables them to predict what is valued in the team (McClintock and Liebrand 1988). Thus, the social motivation expressed in the conflict exchange spills over to bystanders’ perception of social motivation in the team.

**Proposition 5.** Conflict exchanges that are more prosocially motivated lead to bystanders perceiving prosocial motivation as normatively valued in the team, whereas conflict exchanges that are more proself-motivated lead to bystanders perceiving proself motivation as normatively valued in the team.
The perception of what is valued in the team will subsequently influence the behavior of bystanders in response to the conflict. We define bystander responses broadly as the perceptions they may have of the conflict parties (e.g., liking, perceptions of task capabilities) as well as the relationships and interactions they may have with the conflict parties (Ridgeway and Diekema 1989). Similar to the reciprocity argument for conflict responses, we argue that the response of bystanders to the conflict will be a function of the perceived social motivation of the conflict parties and bystander social motivation (Balliet et al. 2011). Keeping objective task capabilities constant—positive perceptions of task capabilities should be positively associated with support for influence for that team member (Berger et al. 1972)—we propose that bystanders will respond more positively (in the form of liking and interactions) to conflict parties they perceive as more prosocially motivated than to conflict parties they perceive as more proself-motivated, especially when the bystanders are also prosocially motivated. Conflict expressions that are more prosocially motivated signal that the conflict initiator or responder prioritizes team goals over personal goals. Prioritizing collective interests over personal interests is likely to benefit the bystander, as their interests are likely better served by the collective focus than by a focus on the personal interests of another (Willer 2009). This should generate a more positive response from a bystander to the conflicting party that is perceived as more prosocially motivated.

Furthermore, these positive responses will be amplified when the bystander is more prosocially motivated. More prosocially motivated bystanders will have a more positive response to those conflict parties whom they perceive to be acting in the interest of the team, because the interests of the bystander and the conflict party are aligned (Polzer et al. 1998). This proposition follows directly from our analysis of the role of social motivation in hierarchy conflict engagement and expression applied to the bystander. Similar to parties directly implicated in the conflict, social motivation influences bystanders’ evaluation of a hierarchy conflict and its parties. The focus of a more prosocially motivated bystander is on achieving collective goals. If one of the conflict parties is perceived to be the most effective way towards collective goal achievement, this is likely to generate support from the bystander. Conversely, a more proself-motivated bystander is motivated by achieving personal goals (De Dreu et al. 2008). A proself-
motivated bystander is less likely to support a conflict party because it does not explicitly serve their goals and runs the risk of ending up in the losing camp. While we do expect a more proself-motivated bystander to have a more positive response to a conflict party that is perceived to be prosocially motivated than to a conflict party that is perceived to be proself-motivated, we expect stronger support for the conflict party that is prosocially motivated from a more prosocially motivated bystander.

**Proposition 6.** Bystander social motivation moderates the positive relationship between prosocial motivation of the conflict party and response to this conflict party from the bystander, such that more prosocially motivated bystanders respond more positively than more proself-motivated bystanders to prosocially motivated conflict parties.

**Team performance.** We define team performance as “the degree to which a team accomplishes its goals or mission” (Greer et al. 2018, p. 592) which is expressed by such indicators as team output quality, output quantity, efficiency, and creativity (Bell 2007, Devine and Philips 2001). A team’s performance is determined not only by the skills and abilities of its members but also by the processes they use to interact with one another and accomplish work such as their level of cooperation (LePine et al. 2008, Mathieu et al. 2008). Cooperation, in this sense, captures those actions in which team members engage and states that emerge which enhance perceptions of shared fate and promote support (Beersma et al. 2003, Deutsch 1949). Cooperation can be expressed in multiple ways such as through enhanced trust and cohesiveness, increased information sharing, and greater social support (Beersma et al. 2013).

We have argued up to this point that hierarchy conflict expressions that are prosocially motivated (vs proself-motivated) are likely to lead to more constructive conflict exchanges, which, in turn, lead to a perception in the team that team goals are valued over personal goals. As a consequence of these effects, hierarchy conflict that is prosocially motivated will more positively affect team performance than hierarchy conflict that is proself motivated. Regardless of whether the hierarchy conflict results in a change in the hierarchy or an affirmation of the existing hierarchy, we can expect the team to be more supportive of the hierarchy when this outcome is achieved through the more direct and less intense hierarchy conflict expressions that follow from prosocial motivation than when it is the result of the less
direct and more intense conflict expressions that proself motivation is more likely to give rise to. Such
greater support for the hierarchy in and of itself can be positive for team performance (cf. Bendersky and
Hays’ 2017 conclusions regarding clarity about the hierarchy). The cooperative team climate that such
conflict experiences may foster should also be associated with higher cooperation within the team.

Conflict exchanges that characterize a hierarchy conflict that is proself motivated, in contrast, are
more likely to be destructive to and damage the relationships in the team. These conflict exchanges are
more likely to invoke negative emotional responses while having lower informational value and are more
likely to pit team members against one another and signal that personal goals are valued over team goals,
which will reduce the cooperation in the team. Thus, at the team level, we expect that the more
prosocially motivated the conflict parties are, the more cooperative the team as a whole will be, because
of how the hierarchy conflict is expressed and the conflict dynamics this sets in motion. Cooperation is
important for interdependent teams, as cooperative behavior tends to result in better team performance
(Beersma et al. 2003, LePine et al. 2008, Pinto et al. 1993, Wageman and Baker 1997). Thus, we propose
the following:

**Proposition 7.** Hierarchy conflict that is more prosocially motivated (as opposed to more proself-
motivated) has more positive effects on team cooperation and subsequent performance.

**Discussion**

Hierarchy conflict poses a significant challenge for teams, as current empirical findings
predominantly point to its negative effect (e.g. Antino et al. 2019, Franke et al. 2022, Lee et al. 2018, Yu
et al. 2023). Recent reviews have summarized the factors that lead to hierarchy conflict as stemming from
self-interested concerns (Bendersky and Pai 2018, Greer et al. 2017). We challenge this narrative of the
self-interested origins of hierarchy conflict and argue, on the basis of interdependence theory, that
hierarchy conflict may also be driven by a prosocially-motivated team member and lead to more positive
team dynamics and performance outcomes than hierarchy conflict that has its origins in a more proself
motivated team member. Interdependent teams are inherently mixed-motive and offer opportunities to
satisfy personal and team interests (De Dreu and Carnevale 2003). Hierarchy conflict can be engaged in
both to serve one’s own personal goals and to serve the needs of the team. Our analysis demonstrates that more prosocial motivation leads to a higher threshold for hierarchy conflict, reducing the frequency of occurrence. Prosocial motivation also leads to more constructive conflict expressions and responses between conflicting parties, and ultimately to more positive team outcomes, than hierarchy conflict that is more proself-motivated. In sum, we provide a framework to understand why, how, and when the performance-detracting effects of hierarchy conflict that dominate the literature may be observed and why, how, and when hierarchy conflict may be more functional. This has the potential to guide research towards research focused on understanding the positive sides of hierarchy conflicts.

**Implications for Research and Theory.** Our theorizing has a number of implications for research on social hierarchy and conflict. First, our contributions aim to shift how scholars think about hierarchy conflict. Hierarchy conflict research has seen a sharp uptick in interest in the past decade and the field is beginning to consolidate conclusions around its consequences and drivers. Recent reviews suggest that hierarchy conflict is driven by factors that increase self-concern, and empirical research has predominantly focused on the negative effects of such hierarchy conflicts (Bendersky and Pai 2018; Greer et al. 2017). We contrast this perspective with the following question: what if the fundamental distinction between social motives in interdependent situations also applies to hierarchy conflict? The distinction between proself and prosocial motivation has a long-standing history in research on interdependent relationships in general and on interpersonal conflict in particular (Kelley and Thibaut 1978, Pruitt and Rubin 1986). This expansion of underlying motivations challenges our thinking about hierarchy conflict as inherently self-interested and destructive for team relations and outcomes to the possibility that hierarchy conflict could also be team-oriented, focused on joint outcomes, and potentially positive for team relations and outcomes.

Second, our theorizing explains how hierarchy conflict behavior changes based on whether the conflict is engaged in the conflict for more prosocial or more proself motives. We build on recent advances in the conflict literature that outline how the same conflict type (i.e., hierarchy conflict) may be expressed in different ways, integrating insights from conflict expression theory (Weingart et al. 2015), to
advance the hierarchy conflict literature. We articulate how hierarchy conflict is expressed as a function of social motivation and why this affects the nature of the conflict expression. Moreover, our theory speaks to when hierarchy conflict that is more proself- or more prosocially motivated is more likely to occur. As such, our theory sheds light on why the negative effects of hierarchy conflict are observed more frequently in the literature and the conditions under which hierarchy conflict that is prosocially motivated may occur. This aids our understanding of the conditions under which teams may reap the benefits of a hierarchy conflict. Our theory provides a richer and more nuanced account of the hierarchy conflict process that has the potential to spark new research questions.

Finally, our theorizing adopts an explicit multilevel and dynamic perspective (Humphrey and Aime 2014) on the microfoundations of hierarchy conflict. This perspective builds on the microfoundations perspective on conflict to examine how hierarchy conflict develops at the interpersonal level of analysis—the focal level of analysis at which conflict takes place (Shah et al. 2021)—and then evolves to become a team-level process, with team-level effects on outcomes. We extend the conflict microfoundations perspective to a different type of conflict from what has been examined in the microfoundations perspective and which may have different microfoundations: hierarchy conflict. We further extend this perspective by analyzing how the hierarchy conflict dynamics at the interpersonal level develop on the basis of varying motivations to engage in the conflict. Thus, by adopting this microfoundations perspective on hierarchy conflict, our research connects with recent insights in the conflict literature that intrateam conflict is a multi-level phenomenon that predominantly originates between two conflict parties (Humphrey et al. 2017, Shah et al. 2021), but can impact team outcomes, consistent with our theorizing.

**Opportunities to Extend Our Model.** This theory can be valuably developed to also capture how the formal hierarchy, the position of team members in the a priori team hierarchy, and other conflict types interact with hierarchy conflict. A first way to extend our theorizing is to understand how a formal team hierarchy may play into the development and dynamics of a hierarchy conflict. We would expect formal hierarchies to be a constraining force in a hierarchy conflict: formal hierarchies are likely to be
(perceived to be) less mutable (similar to power hierarchies), which would result in less competitive behaviors, as the chance of successfully changing one’s position in the hierarchy is likely to be lower (Hays and Bendersky 2015). That said, formal hierarchies are also likely to be perceived as less legitimate, particularly compared with an expertise hierarchy, because other factors impact who is assigned as the team leader beyond task competency (e.g., who was available, tenure, favors, and other political considerations). Therefore, exploring how social motivation interacts with the formality of the hierarchy to predict hierarchy conflict would be an interesting extension for future research.

A second avenue is to incorporate where in the social hierarchy the conflict takes place. Although hierarchy conflict can occur between any two team members, when a hierarchy conflict occurs among members ranked higher within the team’s social hierarchy, the conflict—and thus also how it is expressed—may have a greater impact on the team than when it takes place at lower levels. Conflict that takes place toward the top of the team’s social hierarchy may be more disruptive because the team members engaged in it are more influential within the team. As a result, their actions, such as their conflict expressions, could have a greater impact on the team by virtue of their ability to shape team decisions and actions (Bunderson et al. 2016). Thus, the extent to which their conflict expressions are more cooperative or more competitive (i.e., as per the effect of social motivation) should also exert a stronger influence on the team. In comparison, team members engaged in a hierarchy conflict lower in the team’s social hierarchy are less influential. Accordingly, their conflict expressions should be less influential in the team than those of members higher in the hierarchy.

Finally, conflict research has a tradition of examining the interrelationships between more established conflict types (i.e., task and relationship; Humphrey et al. 2017, de Wit et al. 2013). Future research could consider the interrelationships between hierarchy conflict and other conflict types. This would extend existing insights showing that task conflict interacts with status conflict to predict team performance, such that the benefits of higher task conflict only emerge when status conflict is low (Bendersky and Hays 2012). Similar interacting effects may exist for hierarchy conflict and other conflict types. Moreover, exploring the conditions under which an individual team member decides to engage in a
hierarchy conflict or another type of conflict would be interesting.

**Practical Implications.** Our theoretical framework has important implications for how teams make sense of and handle hierarchy conflicts. First, we aim to challenge the popular idea that hierarchy conflict is inherently bad for teams and to be avoided at all costs. Our framework suggests that hierarchy conflict sparked by team-serving motives may not be bad and may even improve team functioning. Adopting a uniform approach to stifle all hierarchy conflict may hurt the team in the long term, especially because hierarchy conflict that is prosocially motivated is already less likely to occur than hierarchy conflict that is proself-motivated. Therefore, the next time a subordinate asks to be moved up a higher rung, give them a chance and get curious about their reasons for wanting to change the team hierarchy.

Additionally, fostering prosocial motivation can help team members engage in hierarchy conflict for the right reasons and help other members also respond constructively when the hierarchy is challenged. Conversely, a strategy that allows proself motivation to dominate, whether intentionally or unintentionally, likely produces both more hierarchy conflict and more intense and destructive conflict exchanges. Therefore, nudges that can be built into the team environment that encourage team members to approach hierarchy conflict from a prosocial mindset can be helpful. For example, tying team performance to incentives for managerial positions can help ensure that employees keep the interests of the team in mind when lobbying for a position of higher rank.

**Conclusion**

Although the past decade has seen a marked increase in the study of hierarchy conflict, this research has adopted a predominantly negative view of its effects, underpinned by an assumptions that proself motivation drives hierarchy conflict. In this paper we invoke interdependence theory to challenge the assumption that hierarchy conflict is purely driven by self-serving motives and is therefore always negative for team outcomes. We aim to further understanding about when, how, and why hierarchy conflict unfolds and influences team outcomes under differing social motives. Our framework helps redirect the focus of how hierarchy conflict is viewed in the literature—we establish that positive views on hierarchy conflict are important to consider, and that social motivation is a key tool to unpack the
potential positive or negative impact of hierarchy conflict in teams.
References


HIERARCHY CONFLICT


HIERARCHY CONFLICT


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**Figure 1.** Model of Impact of Social Motivation on Hierarchy Conflict

*Intrapersonal*  
- Prosocial motivation  
  - Conflict Threshold

*Interpersonal*

- Initial conflict engagement
  - Oppositional Intensity
  - Expression Directness

- Conflict response
  - Oppositional Intensity
  - Expression Directness

*Team*

- Perceived Team Prosocial Motivation
- Bystander response
- Team Cooperation & Performance

*Note.* The interrupted line between bystander response and team cooperation and performance is not explicitly proposed in our model. Yet it is a natural consequence that how the bystander responds to the conflict influences the team’s level of cooperation and performance.