There is No Away: Where Do People Go When They Avoid an Interpersonal Conflict?

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Abstract

When people avoid conflict, there is no "away." Where do they go physically or mentally? Both engaging and avoiding have a push and a pull. If we knew where avoiders go, we could study the pull of avoidance. This is a descriptive study ($N = 446$) of interpersonal conflict. We found that physical and mental avoidance appeared with similar frequency, and that they could occur in combination. People often recognized their need for avoidance early, based on the topic being familiar or various signals of trouble. Avoidance during the conflict could be physical or mental, but notably involved false agreement or topic manipulation. The possibility of violence (physical, verbal, or emotional) was often relevant. Relationship worries frequently motivated the avoidance. After the avoidance rumination was common, often centering on what we called "festering anger."

This article was inspired by the trash bins at one of our institutions. One of us was wandering through the hallway vaguely thinking about an undergraduate class later in the day in which he was going to cover distributive, integrative, and avoidant approaches to conflict. His eye fell on one of the pairs of trash receptacles in the hallway. One large cardboard box was marked "recycling," with graphics and notes on various recyclable items. But the other was labeled "trash" and prominently displayed the slogan, "Throwing that away? There is no away."

When people avoid a conflict, they do something or go somewhere. But where is that? Where is "away"? What do people do there? We have substantial literatures on how to engage in conflict. We have whole graduate programs in negotiation, mediation, and collective bargaining. We have full bookshelves explaining how to aim a conflict interaction at being constructive (vs. destructive), integrative (vs. distributive), cooperative (vs. competitive), far-sighted (vs. short-sighted), task-oriented (vs. emotional), realistic (vs. unrealistic), and many other distinctions. A multitude of books gives practical advice on how to implement cooperative, dialogic, reflective, and other kinds of tactics (i.e., where to go and what to do when you are being integrative). But when we discover parties being avoidant, they seem to fall out of our literature, at least in comparison with the far more substantial scholarship about the various flavors of conflict engagement. Avoidance is not trash—our metaphor should not be taken that far—but it does seem accurate to say that we have not much explored where "away" is.

Exploring "away" is the purpose of this investigation. We will begin by discussing what is known about conflict avoidance. We will soon see that that literature mainly discusses the motives or reasons for avoidance, as well as a few tactics that have been independently interesting on their own. But once someone has changed a topic or swallowed an objection, their story seems to end. The bulk of this article is the exploratory study we undertook with the aim of gathering people's self-understandings and reports of their own escapes from interpersonal conflicts. We seek to answer the research question, *When people are avoiding a conflict, where do they go or what do they do instead, and why?*

Avoidance of Interpersonal Conflicts: A Limited Understanding

Let us begin by surveying where we are as a research community on the task of understanding conflict avoidance. We freely admit that what follows is mainly a sampling of the literature. Nearly every paper on distributive/integrative approaches, on cooperative/competitive tactics, on productive/destructive patterns, mentions avoidance at some point. This actually implies the first point we cover here that avoidance is often just understood as the absence of something more interesting to the researcher. But we cannot possibly review every passing remark or incidental result bearing on avoidance in our literature. By means of our sampling, then, we cover a few points about what motivates avoidance and what forms it can take.

Avoidance as What Did not Happen

Researchers tend to focus on the study of observable active conflict behaviors, such as being distributive or integrative. Avoidance refers at best to a noticeably absent participant in such a behavioral pattern and at worst to some human instantiation of missing data. Avoidance is a sort of tactical vacuum: It means that more interesting and observable things were not done.

We can see this in various operationalizations of conflict tactics, strategies, styles, approaches, and so forth. For example, in a well-regarded program of research on serial arguments (a serial argument is one that recognizably recurs in an ongoing relationship), Bevan (2014, p. 781) gives self-report items for measuring integrative, criticism/blame, threat/insult, compromise, and avoidance actions. As we review her items, notice the contrast between something being concretely specified for the first-listed tactics versus the vague indications of absent behavior for avoidance: "I listened to my partner's point of view" (integrative); "I criticized an aspect of his or her personality" (criticism/blame); "I threatened my partner" (threat/insult); "I compromised with my partner" (compromise); but "I avoided my partner" and "I changed the topic of discussion" (avoidance). Changed the topic to what? Avoided the partner in what sense (physically, mentally)? Notice that an observer might well be able to tell that someone was criticizing, insulting, or actually responding to what the other person said, but would be hard-pressed to say whether one of the participants was only pretending to participate, was simply distracted from the interaction, or was making a strange topical move out of intention rather than confusion. Tactical behaviors are observable, except for avoidance. What is noticed is only the absence of something else.

Another example is the measurement of conflict styles. In Rahim's (1983, p. 372) measure, here are the best loading items for the avoidance style: "I attempt to avoid being 'put on the spot' and try to keep my conflict with my __ to myself"; "I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with my __"; "I try to stay away from disagreement with my __"; "I avoid an encounter with my __"; and "I try to keep my disagreement with my __ to myself in order to avoid hard feelings." Very little is observably specified in these items. Mostly they are list of affirmative things one could have done to *avoid avoidance*: Take a clear position, discuss openly, engage in disagreement, do an encounter, and express disagreement. On this common conception, avoidance isn't doing: It is not doing.

In contrast to the self-report instruments just reviewed, Gottman (1993) used an observational methodology to identify avoidant couples. He invited couples to his laboratory and they participated in

various conversations, including a conflictive one, and they returned for another session 4 years later. Their conversations were recorded. He found three stable groups of couples: validators, volatiles, and avoiders. To classify couples, he combined results from two observational coding systems, the Rapid Couples Interaction Scoring System and the Specific Affect Coding System. Both of these coding approaches of course concentrated on clearly observable behaviors: for example, anger, positive reciprocity, contempt, humor, and so forth. This is encouraging. How did Gottman identify avoiders? Basically, his methodology was to identify groups who had low or absent scores on the codable behaviors and then label them avoiders. Avoiders differed from engagers because the engagers complained and criticized more often, and more evidently built positive agendas. True, he reported that avoiders were found to have more "listener withdrawal," but this was operationalized as more stonewalling, itself a series of absences: not looking at the other, minimal facial activity, and little vocal backchanneling. In a coding system such as this one, avoidance is how we label the absence of something that we could otherwise have been able to affirmatively identify.

Many other measurement procedures exist, of course, but these seem representative to us. To get a measure of avoidance, people are asked to estimate the degree to which they did not do something, or they are observed having done some particular behaviors rarely or not at all. The measures look away from what the researcher focused on, not toward what drew participants' own attention. We want to emphasize that we are not actually proposing this circumstance as a criticism, although we cannot help noticing that the disdain for avoiding may be most typical of the individualist cultures in which a lot of our research is done (e.g., Holt & DeVore, 2005; Kim & Leung, 2000). If someone is researching a contrast between cooperative and competitive conflict activity, the truth is that avoiders really are something like missing data for that study. We only intend to say that the present understandings miss some opportunities. One is obvious: It would be interesting to know where avoiders go and what they do.

The other opportunity may prove to have much more theoretical importance. Let us stipulate that avoiders go somewhere—that they engage in some other behavior or preoccupation rather than the conflict to which they have been invited with more or less insistence. Both the conflict engagement and the "away" experience will have particular costs and benefits. We know a few things about the possible expenses and profits of conflict engagement (e.g., Hample, 2018, ch. 3; Paglieri & Castelfranchi, 2010). But we know very little about the "away" experiences because we do not have a manageable list of them. Suppose that, in the moment, a woman can either respond to her husband in an argument about household finances or go to a bridal shower for her best friend; suppose a roommate can either participate in a conflict about the apartment's tidiness or go online to play World of Warcraft; and suppose a parent can either rebuke a teenager for bad grades or just have a glass of wine in peace. These simple examples of opportunity costs expose the theoretical possibility that conflict avoidance may actually be more explainable by the features of the "away" than by the stakes, character, and possible outcomes of the conflict itself. We need a more pointed and affirmative understanding of conflict avoidance before we can explore this possibility.

Motives for Avoidance

As we sample the findings about what motivates people to avoid face-to-face conflicts, we should keep in mind what we have just noticed about the operationalizations of avoidance. Those measures are typically the outcome variables to which indicants or categories of motivation are associated. Thus, many of the findings amount to saying that a high concern for something (e.g., relational satisfaction and self-esteem) results in people often not doing something else (e.g., eye contact and argumentative engagement). The findings do not affirmatively inform us about what motivates us to undertake specific avoidant behavior: to go for solitary walks (are walks enjoyable?), to put on our headphones (have you listened to the album you downloaded that afternoon?), or to agree falsely to anything the other person says (if we end this quickly will I still miss the start of NCIS?). If I do not want to argue with you because I detest you, simply

measuring why I do not want to interact with you will be genuinely predictive. But if I do not want to engage with you because I am late for my bowling league, we need data about bowling. For the most part, we do not have it. Sometimes people intuitively operate in advance of our research base. When a surly teenager starts to storm off to her room rather than answer some pointed questions, many parents recognize the benefits of a well-equipped bedroom and threaten some form of electronic grounding unless the teenager stays and talks. So as we review the literature to follow, we need to remember that we are mainly seeing information about motivation *not* to do particular things (e.g., integrate and compete) rather than motivation to perform any particular avoidant behaviors (e.g., go bowling). We should also acknowledge that our data are Western and so might not properly match avoidance motivations from other parts of the world (e.g., Brockner, et al., 2001; Holt & DeVore, 2005; Kim & Leung, 2000).

The general approach–avoid summary of motivation has been combined with standard cost/benefit models of decision making to generate information about conflict avoidance. Roloff and Ifert (2000) proposed that people will often avoid conflicts because they feel the cost of engagement is too high. The positive possibilities of an interpersonal conflict (e.g., resolving a relational problem) are weighed against anticipated negatives (e.g., frustration and hurt), and avoidance is chosen when the costs seem more pressing than the gains. In dating and family relationships, the fear of a bad outcome can cause people to suppress complaints so that conflicts are never initiated or acknowledged (Afifi & Olson, 2005; Cloven & Roloff, 1993). Bevan, Hefner, and Love (2014) contrasted serial and nonserial arguments among undergraduates involved in a romantic relationship. They found that avoidance was more likely in the nonserial conflicts, although this effect dissipated as the serial arguments moved through 6 or more episodes.

Other researchers have also studied the potential costs of engaging in face-to-face arguing. Perhaps the most general finding is that people fear the possibility of escalation—that an argument will get so far out of control that the arguers will be carried away by it and lose agency to discipline what they or the other people are doing (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Martin & Scheerhorn, 1985; Paglieri & Castelfranchi, 2010; Trapp, 1990). Several studies showed that the more obvious it is to participants that an "argument" is taking place (rather than a "discussion," for example), the more danger they see in the interaction (Hample & Benoit, 1999; Hample, Benoit, Houston, Purifoy, VanHyfte, & Wardell, 1999). This literature shows that violence is viewed as an ongoing possibility in conflictual conversations and that uncontrolled arguing may even be implicated in domestic violence (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989). Lesser and perhaps more mundane possible costs have also been identified: incivility, enduring the other person's lack of reasonability, emotional harm to self or other, likelihood of the conflict being unresolvable, inappropriateness in that time and place, and the chance of losing the argument (Hample, Paglieri, & Na, 2012). This list of costs and their implied possible benefits has done a good job of predicting whether or not people will voluntarily engage in an argument (for a review of research, see Hample, 2018, ch. 3). However, we should take note that the whole research tradition is one-sided: It explains why people did *not* do engagement, but is silent about why they chose the particular "away" thing, or even what it was.

Since interpersonal conflicts are often recognizable as sources of stress, the literature on coping is relevant here. For instance, Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) found that potential conflict topics were more likely to be avoided in romantic relationships when people felt stressed by genuine uncertainty as to the status or nature of the relationship. Many specific coping actions have been studied, and categorizing them as approach or avoidance is not unusual (e.g., Roth & Cohen, 1986). Roth and Cohen, who surveyed more types of avoidance than merely conflict-related, summarized avoidance's potential costs and benefits. Benefits included stress reduction, increased hope and courage, and the possibility of dosing (i.e., slowly exposing oneself to bits of information rather than taking in the whole stressful event at once). Costs included interference with appropriate action, emotional numbness, disruptive avoidance behaviors, and loss of insight opportunity. They concluded that "in the long run, the positive consequences of avoidance are largely effects that work to facilitate approach" (p. 817). Suls and Fletcher (1985) conducted a meta-analysis of avoidant versus attentive coping tactics and found almost no

effectiveness advantage for either approach, considered overall. More pointed follow-up analyses suggested that avoidance had small advantages in the short term, with weaker benefits for nonavoidance in the long term. Evidence suggested that avoidance may have coping effectiveness approximately equivalent to active engagement with a stressor, at least in the most general terms. Being motivated to avoid is therefore not necessarily a wrong coping preference.

Costs and benefits are situation-specific and reflect an immediate subjective estimate of possible efforts and outcomes—for that conflict, with that person, on that topic, at that time. However, people might also carry general preferences with them, so that they more readily see possible harms or opportunities. Such predispositions imply default levels of motivation to avoid or engage. These preferences can be understood as personality traits or states: For example, a depressed person may see little hope of repairing a relationship, a narcissistic person might assume that others will immediately agree, and so forth. In fact, Suls and Fletcher (1985, p. 267 ff.) reviewed a few studies that actually operationalized avoidance as a personality trait. Thus, some interactants may be more generally avoidant and others more generally eager to engage. Antonioni (1998) studied about 350 undergraduates and 100 managers and reported that avoidance was positively associated with agreeableness and neuroticism, and negatively correlated with extroversion, openness, and conscientiousness. All five supertraits collectively accounted for about 20% of the variance in endorsement of the avoidance style, with some variability across samples. Caughlin and Vangelisti (2000) found that demand–withdraw patterns in 57 married couples were positively associated with neuroticism, but negatively correlated with agreeableness.

Argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are two specific personality traits that have predicted engagement in interpersonal conflict: People high in argumentativeness are eager to engage an issue on its merits, and people high in verbal aggressiveness are unusually inclined to initiate *ad hominem* attacks (Rancer & Avtgis, 2014). Those who take conflict personally have avoidant impulses (Dallinger & Hample, 1995). Caughlin and Vangelisti (2000) reported that argumentativeness was positively associated with demanding in the marital demand–withdraw patterns they studied, regardless of whether it was the husband or wife who was argumentative/demanding. We can infer from this pattern of results that low argumentatives and low verbal aggressives are the people more inclined to avoid conflict, as are those who personalize conflicts. In a particular moment, personality traits and cost/benefit estimates act in unison, so that personality may affect estimates of costs/benefits and thereby express itself indirectly on the decision to initiate conflict (Zhan & Hample, 2016).

So, the main motivational influences that lead to conflict avoidance are cost/benefit estimates. These can be colored by both enduring and temporary personality characteristics. However, we emphasize that to date the predictions of avoidance are mainly predictions of absence—the absence of engagement or sincerity, for example. We believe that there is no away. Predicting that one thing is not done (avoidance) is not quite the same thing as predicting that another thing will be done (approach), and for every avoidance, something else is approached.

Avoidance Behaviors

Several avoidance behaviors have been studied, perhaps because they are interesting social actions themselves. Before we mention those, however, we want to emphasize how limited a description they provide of conflict avoidance. The inventory of conflict avoidance behaviors essentially consists of everything that a human can think or do, except for serious conflict engagement on that topic in that moment. We do not have data on the co-occurrence of conflict invitations on one hand, and the avoidant alternatives of bowling, lawn mowing, grocery shopping, cuddling a child, daydreaming, or playing a video game, on the other. The present study is actually an attempt to assemble some information of that kind. But here we will give notice of work on avoidant behaviors such as topic avoidance (and topic shifts), passive aggressiveness, and demand–withdraw sequences before summing up.

One avoidance tactic that is well-studied is topic avoidance, or relatedly, a quick topic shift to a different matter. This is not always examined in the context of interpersonal conflict, but empirical results about interaction in general can still be applied. In a particularly thorough study, Dailey and Palomares (2004) surveyed undergraduates about relationships involving either a significant other, their mother, or their father. They identified 25 particular strategies for topic avoidance and grouped them into eight categories, which were statistical composites that they did not label (nor could we). Among the many specific tactics were laughter, clever remarks, little stories, silences, delays, requests for a new topic, crying, pretending ignorance, nonverbal avoidance, inviting a third party, making an interesting but irrelevant announcement, lying, insulting, conversational dominance, interruption, guilt trip, *ad hominem* attack, physical affection, an irrelevant compliment, terminating the conversation, and declaring the topic taboo. A lot of variety is evident in this list. The tactics were differentially chosen depending on the conversational partner (mother, boyfriend, etc.), had different levels of directness and rudeness, and took on different roles in predicting relational satisfaction and emotional closeness. Most of these are actually observable behaviors that only take on their avoidant character in the context of a conflict invitation.

Both Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) and Dailey and Palomares (2004) provided extensive enumerations of avoided topics. Even a superficial inspection of those lists shows that they commonly included potential conflict issues. A condensed topical system appears in Baxter and Wilmot (1985), who found that the taboo topics in romantic relationships could be summarized as being the state of the relationship, extra-relational romantic activity, relationship norms, previous romantic partners, disclosures with negative implications, and "conflict-inducing topics." The latter included anything that emphasized or mentioned how different the two relational partners were, but we can certainly see that most of the other main categories also included matters that could easily lead to conflict. For instance, Baxter and Wilmot reported that the main reasons that the "state of the relationship" issues were taboo (this was the most common category) were as follows: relationship destruction (41%), individual vulnerability (19%), effectiveness of the tacit mode (just being perceptive rather than being explicit; 17%), futility of talk (14%), and closeness cueing (talk of this sort might indicate more intimacy than the person felt was applicable; 10%). Many of these matters seem to be ripe for conflict and thus motivated their avoidance. In sum, the topic avoidance literature mainly shows a considerable variety of avoidance targets and tactics, having in common that they mainly constitute something other than engagement on a particular issue, actual or anticipated.

Topic avoidance is not the only relevant tactic here. Passive aggressiveness is a sort of almost avoidance (cf. Boardman & Horowitz, 1994). The passive-aggressive person "gives up" but in such a way as to display martyrdom, induce guilt, and perhaps end up in a dominating position (Vaillant, 1993). We draw attention to this tactic here because we notice that by officially conceding, the participant does not need to address the topic at hand.

Demand–withdraw patterns are widely studied in interpersonal contexts (e.g., Caughlin, 2002; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). This is an interactive sequence that involves avoidance. One person "demands," that is, presses an issue and insists upon an answer. The other person, rather than engaging as requested, "withdraws" from the interaction. The use of such a pattern reduces marital satisfaction in the short term, but more enduring effects are not nearly so clear (Caughlin, 2002). Notice that like other versions of avoidance, withdrawal can be accomplished by many means.

Efforts have been made to address the obvious superfluity of avoidance possibilities. Wang, Fink, and Cai (2012) developed a typology of conflict avoidance tactics. This made use of three conceptual dimensions: time (immediate or ongoing), issue (avoiding/not avoiding), and person (avoiding/not avoiding). This 8-cell system included two cells that did not involve any avoiding at all, but the other six cells were as follows. Withdrawal avoids both person and issue in an immediate situation. Passive domination engages the issue but not the person in an immediate circumstance. Pretending engages the person but not the issue in an immediate situation. Exit avoids both the person and the issue in the long term. Out-flanking takes on the issue in the long term but avoids the other person. Finally, yielding avoids the issue

but engages with the person over the long term. This typology is obviously a more useful summary than an endless list of specific behaviors, but one can quickly see that each of the Wang et al. categories could also be implemented in innumerable ways.

Frankly, it does not seem productive to go much further in trying to review tactical lists. Every researcher can generate a specific one from each new sample, or else can take on a general category system such as Wang, Fink, and Cai's and impose it as a useful general summary. As we said in the beginning of this subsection, avoidance constitutes any sort of thinking or behaving that is not conflict engagement and that is not a very limiting conceptualization. However, we wish to emphasize that all this work—and there is more that we have not reviewed—lists tactics, not places. For instance, if one topic is avoided, what takes its place? At best, this research shows how people move, but not where they go. We get very little clue as to the "away" from this work.

Avoidance is Widely Noted but Rarely Observed

We have reviewed enough high-quality research on conflict management to sustain our basic point: that our theoretical and empirical work mainly treats avoidance as an absence. We can see that it happened because engagement did not. But we rarely ask what happened instead. A few behaviors—topic change and passive aggressiveness, for example—have been studied as affirmative events. We could have reviewed some other possibilities, such as crying at will, toddlers' tantrums, silent refusals to engage in intimacy, or desperate commitments to long bouts of exercise, but we felt there was little point. As we said earlier, anything that is not engagement in the moment can be avoidance. We are able to make predictions about the people and circumstances that are likely to have high or low levels of avoidance. But in the end, avoiding mainly just falls out of our studies and theories. Our study is not ambitious enough to repair this gap, but we believe it provides a useful start.

Method

Participants and Procedures

We collected data from two separate samples, undergraduates and MTurk workers. We did this primarily to increase the variability and generalizability in our sample, and we have no particular sample-specific expectations. Both samples filled out surveys online. With the exception of a few demographic variables (e.g., year in school and employment status), the surveys were identical.

We screened the data prior to undertaking any analyses. Respondents who provided no data at all (we suspected software or connectivity issues) or who consented but did not proceed to the following page of the survey were eliminated. This resulted in the loss of 49 undergraduate and 262 MTurk respondents. Inspection of their IP addresses suggested that many immediately tried again until they were able to complete the survey. Several duplicate pairs of responses (detectable by observing identical answers to open-ended questions) were both eliminated. As a last quality control, we eliminated 12 respondents who seemed to be supplying dictionary definitions or material pasted from Internet searches to open-ended questions or who replied so briefly that we questioned their level of commitment. This left us with 245 undergraduates and 201 MTurk respondents, for a total of 446.

Undergraduates were enrolled in communication courses at a large public mid-Atlantic university and received minor course credit for their participation. More women (68%) than men appeared in the sample. Their average age was 19.2 years (SD = 2.0). About half (49%) of the undergraduates self-reported that they were Euro-American, followed by 14% Asian American, 10% African American, and a variety of other ethnicities or nationalities, including "combination of the above" (7%) and "prefer not to answer" (7%). Two-thirds (67%) were freshmen, indicating that they were probably enrolled in a university-wide general education course and thus represented many choices of major. About half (46%)

estimated that the annual income "of the family in which you mainly live" was less than $110,000, about a quarter (29%) said their family income was more than $110,000, and a quarter (26%) preferred not to answer this question.

Sex was almost evenly distributed within the MTurk sample, with 47% male and 52% female. Their average age was 35.0 years ($SD = 10.0$). Euro-American was again the most common self-reported ethnicity or national origin (60%), followed by Asian (9%), Asian American (8%), Hispanic American (8%), African American (5%), and a scattering of other answers including "combination" (5%). Nearly half (47%) reported that their annual family income was <$50,000, with 19% estimating incomes of $50,000–$70,000, 13% estimating incomes between $70,000 and $90,000, 19% giving higher estimates than $90,000, and 4% preferring not to answer. More than two-thirds of respondents (70%) said they were employed full time and another 17% reported having a part-time job. Unemployed respondents accounted for 5% of the MTurk sample. Their modal education level was university graduate (37%), followed by some college (23%), a graduate degree (18%), community college graduate (12%), high school graduate (6%), and some graduate school (4%).

Instrumentation

The survey was mainly a series of open-ended questions. These were contextualized by the introduction to the survey:

> This is a study of how and why people avoid conflicts. We would like you to think of a potential conflict that you avoided. This should have been an interpersonal conflict, probably with one other person but possibly with several others.
> There are a lot of ways you might have avoided the conflict: you might have left physically, you might have quit listening, you might have changed the topic, and probably a lot more. We are going to ask you to describe the conflict (or at least what you thought the conflict was going to be) and how you avoided it. It would be best if it were a conflict that you remembered pretty clearly. It could have been important or unimportant.

This introduction was followed by a series of questions that invited respondents to write a paragraph-long answer to each. These are listed in Figure 1.

Coding of data

Two coders, along with the authors, undertook repeated cycles of qualitative reading, note-taking, extraction of themes, clarification of themes, specification of theme details, and generation of codable categories. The unit of analysis was the whole series of open-ended answers for each respondent. The reason for this unitization decision was that respondents frequently covered some issues spontaneously early in the survey and then chose not to repeat themselves when the matter was queried explicitly. We produced a coding manual, available from the authors, which went through several revisions. Once we got to the point of having a draft manual, we would code 30–50 responses, calculate intercoder reliability, discuss deviations, revise the manual, and code a new group of responses. Coding was done independently, with no discussions until the subsample had been coded by both coders. Final reliability statistics are in Table 1, along with basic descriptive information. The reliability estimates were calculated for the final 252 responses. Several variables were not successfully coded, but the low κ values tended to occur for variables that were rarely coded as present. These results are reported anyway because the rarity of their appearance may itself be interesting to other researchers. Most of the coded categories were coded as present/absent/uncodable, so the table mainly shows percentages of codable respondents for whom a particular variable was coded as present. Coding differences were resolved by consensus between the coders.

[GENERAL]
Open-ended: What was the conflict about? In other words, what was its topic?
Open-ended: What happened between you and the other person? Did the conflict get started at all?
Open-ended: Why did you avoid the conflict?

[OUTCOMES]
Open-ended: What is the worst thing that could have happened if you had not avoided the conflict?
  Closed-ended: How likely would that outcome have been?
  Closed-ended: How would that worst outcome have affected you?
  Closed-ended: How would that worst outcome have affected the other person?
Open-ended: What is the best thing that could have happened if you had not avoided the conflict?
  Closed-ended: How likely would that outcome have been?
  Closed-ended: How would that best outcome have affected you?
  Closed-ended: How would that best outcome have affected the other person?
Open-ended: What is the most likely thing that would have happened if you had not avoided the conflict?
  Closed-ended: How would that likely outcome have affected you?
  Closed-ended: How would that likely outcome have affected the other person?

[JUSTIFICATION]
  Closed-ended: Do you think that the other person had a point?
  Closed-ended: Was there anything he or she could have said to change your mind?
  Closed-ended: Was there anything you could have said that would have convinced the other person to change his or her mind?
  Closed-ended: Do you think that the other person had a right to weigh in on this topic? Why or why not?
  Closed-ended: Do you think that you had a right to weigh in on this topic? Why or why not?

[SETTING]
Open-ended: Please tell us about the setting of the conflict. Specifically, where were you, what were you doing, who else was there, etc.
  Closed-ended: Was the location an appropriate place to have this conflict? Why or why not?
  Closed-ended: Was this an appropriate time to have the conflict? Why or why not?
  Closed-ended: Was the overall setting an appropriate one for the conflict in all other respects?

[IMPORTANCE]
  Closed-ended: How important was the potential conflict's topic to you?
  Closed-ended: How important was this topic to the other person?

[PHYSICAL AVOIDANCE]
  Closed-ended: Did you avoid the conflict physically, maybe by leaving or hanging up the phone or not responding to a text?
Open-ended: If you DID avoid the conflict physically, please explain what you did, where you went, and so forth.
  Closed-ended: If you DID avoid the conflict physically, did you go to a familiar place/a new place/not sure how to answer
Open-ended: If you did NOT avoid the conflict physically, would it have been POSSIBLE for you to avoid the conflict physically? (For example, maybe you were both sitting together in the same car and you couldn't very well leave.) Tell us why or why not.

Figure 1. Open-ended and closed-ended questions.

[MENTAL AVOIDANCE]
    Closed-ended: Did you avoid the conflict mentally (but without physically leaving),
    maybe by ignoring the other person or moving your attention away or maybe drinking
    alcohol or using some recreational drug?
Open-ended: If you DID avoid the conflict mentally, please explain what you did.
Open-ended: If you DID avoid the conflict mentally, please explain what you thought about
instead.
    Closed-ended: If you DID avoid the conflict mentally, was the thing you thought about
    instead a familiar thing/a new thing/not sure how to answer
Open-ended: If you did NOT avoid the conflict mentally, would it have been POSSIBLE for you
to avoid the conflict mentally? Tell us why or why not.

[AVOIDANCE DURING THE CONFLICT]
    Closed-ended: Did you avoid the conflict DURING the conversation, maybe by changing
    the topic, talking about something that wasn't quite on point, using humor, or otherwise
    trying to defuse the situation?
Open-ended: If you DID try to avoid the conflict during the conversation, please explain what
topic or idea you talked about instead.
    Closed-ended: If you DID try to avoid the conflict during the conversation, was the topic
    you changed to familiar/new/not sure how to answer
Open-ended: If you did NOT try to avoid the conflict during the conversation, would it have
been POSSIBLE for you to avoid the conflict during the conversation? Tell us why or why not.

[CONFLICT PLANNING]
    Closed-ended: Did you plan for the conflict ahead of time? In other words, did you do
    anything to head off the conflict, prevent it, or make it easier to resolve?
Open-ended: If you DID plan for the conflict ahead of time, please explain what your plan was.
Open-ended: If you DID plan for the conflict ahead of time, why did you choose to plan ahead
for this conflict?
Open-ended: If you did NOT plan for the conflict ahead of time, would it have been POSSIBLE
to plan ahead for this conflict?
Open-ended: Whether you did or did not plan ahead of time for this conflict, do you have a plan
for the next time this conflict presents itself? Why or why not?

[FALSE COOPERATION]
    Closed-ended: Did you avoid the conflict by trying to make it seem as though the conflict
    was really over, maybe by lying or falsely agreeing to something?
Open-ended: If you DID avoid the conflict by trying to make it seem as though the conflict was
really over, please tell us what you did.
Open-ended: If you did NOT avoid the conflict by trying to make it seem as though the conflict
was really over, would it have been POSSIBLE for you to to that? Why or why not?

[ADDITIONAL INFORMATION]
Open-ended: Did you do anything to avoid the conflict that we didn't ask about? Please explain.

[RUMINATION]
    Closed-ended: After things settled down, did you later think about the episode again?
Open-ended: If you DID think about it later, what did you think about?

[SERIAL ARGUMENTS AND INITIATOR]

    Closed-ended: The avoided conflict was one the two of us had had before
    Closed-ended: The avoided conflict is one I expect the two of us will have again
    Closed-ended: I started the avoided conflict
    Closed-ended: The other main person started the avoided conflict
    Closed-ended: A third party started the avoided conflict
    Closed-ended: Have you ever avoided a conflict on that topic with that person before?
    Closed-ended: Has the other main person ever avoided a conflict on that topic with you
    before?

Note. The bracketed labels and indications of open- or closed-ended did not appear in the survey
itself. Indentation is also for the present readers' benefit.

Figure 1. Continued.

Table 1

Reliabilities and "present" frequencies and percentages for coded variables

	Cohen's κ	*f* codable	%
Did the conflict start?	.83	427	61
Topics			
Responsibilities	.59	434	10
Money	.56	434	9
Sex	1.00	434	1
Blame	.57	434	1
School issues	.79	434	5
Work issues	.79	435	11
Friendship	.45	435	8
Romantic	.70	435	8
Family	.53	435	7
Sports	.39	435	2
Identities (race, gender)	.70	435	4
Politics	.95	435	9
Catalysts			
Time	.71	435	3
Stress	.33	435	3
Expectations unmet	.55	435	30
Feelings (personal)	.50	435	43
Feelings (group identity)	.73	435	10
Stakes			
Relational	.87	435	41
Emotional/feelings	.87	435	50
Material resources	.92	435	11
Violence			
Physical possible	.72	435	18
Verbal present	.51	435	24
Verbal possible	.84	435	59
Emotional present	.64	435	56
Settings			
Physical site	.79	429	56 domestic; 21 out in world; 14 at work
Private?	.88	435	43
Avoidance begin at start?	.90	430	36
Group identity involved?	.75	434	13
Physical avoidance			
Type	.57	220	33 leave room; 13 end comm.; 3 walk or drive
Possible?	.79	403	62
Mental avoidance			
Type	.83	262	33 ignore; 11 topic change; 8 focus on task
Possible?	.73	435	64
What signaled to avoid?	.91	425	29 relational threat; 25 threat self-image; 20 threat emotional explode; 18 threat violence
False resolution			
Present?	.94	398	13
Possible?	.89	384	25

Table 1
(continued)

	Cohen's κ	*f* codable	%
Planning			
Avoidance planned?	.85	412	14
Future plan?	.75	429	66
Type future plan	.46	293	37 constructive; 6 destructive; 23 more avoidance
Ruminate?	.90	435	60
Rumination content	.62	250	27 festering anger; 16 how do better; 7 regret; 6 how avoid again

Note. The percentage column normally indicates the percentage of codable respondents who were classified as "yes" or "present." In other cases, the largest percentages of various possibilities are reported.

For the most part, the closed-ended questions were single-item measures. This decision was taken in view of the extensive time and effort we were already asking of our respondents. An exception is that the three appropriateness questions generated a Cronbach's α of .90, and so, we formed a composite variable for appropriateness of engagement. Metrics for the self-report rating scales are in Table 2 (phrasing is in Figure 1).

Results

Descriptive Results

Before we explore the leading themes that appeared in our data set, it might be as well to give some general description of our participants and the conflicts they avoided. Tables 1–3 report many of the simple

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for continuous closed-ended questions

	Scale	Mean	SD
How likely would worst outcome be?	5 = very likely	3.46	1.25
How would worst outcome affect you?	5 = big improvement	2.03	0.81
How would worst outcome affect other?	5 = big improvement	2.28	0.90
How likely would best outcome be?	5 = very likely	2.96	1.35
How would best outcome affect you?	5 = big improvement	3.71	0.95
How would best outcome affect other?	5 = big improvement	3.32	1.04
How most likely outcome affect you?	5 = big improvement	2.46	1.00
How most likely outcome affect other?	5 = big improvement	2.61	0.93
Other have good point?	5 = absolutely yes	2.46	1.28
Could other change your mind?	5 = absolutely yes	2.71	1.30
You have good point?	5 = absolutely yes	4.29	0.93
Could you change other's mind?	5 = absolutely yes	2.99	1.23
Other have right to participate?	5 = absolutely yes	3.48	1.32
You have right to participate?	5 = absolutely yes	4.22	0.92
Appropriateness of conflict	5 = absolutely yes	3.13	1.20
Importance of topic to you?	4 = extremely imp	2.63	1.00
Importance of topic to other?	4 = extremely imp	2.54	1.00

Note. Sample size for these means was 445 or 446. The verbal label for the highest scale value is indicated. Lowest values were 1.

results. In addition, readers may wish to know that the sex of the other main person in the conflict was almost evenly distributed (47% male, 53% female). The most common avoidances were same-sex, being disproportionately male/male or female/female ($\chi^2(1, N = 428) = 45.50$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .33$). In 63% of the conflicts, only the two main people were involved, but 3 people participated in 20% of the cases, 4 in 9%, and 5 or more in 8%. Our respondents reported that the other main person in these episodes was a friend (24%), a parent (11%), a romantic partner (11%), a coworker (11%), an acquaintance (8%), a sibling (7%), a stranger (7%), a spouse (4%), a boss (2%), or a subordinate (2%). The other main person's average estimated age was 30.8 years ($SD = 14.2$). Own and other's age correlated strongly ($r = .48$, $p < .001$), and the other person tended to be older than our respondent (30.8 vs. 26.4; $t(441) = 7.24$, $p < .001$, $d = .34$). The conflicts were most often in a domestic setting, but quite a few were in a public place (Table 1).

No particular topical pattern emerged, with only minor appearances of any particular topic in respondents' descriptions. Respondents rated the mean appropriateness of the conflict in that time and place as being 3.13, almost exactly the midpoint of the 5-point scale. They felt that the conflicts had some importance to self and other, with the ratings again being at about the theoretical midpoint of the 4-point scale.

Avoiders felt that they were in a legitimate position to participate in the conflict. Compared to the other main person, our respondents felt that they had a better substantive position (4.29 vs. 2.46; $t(444) = 21.99$, $p < .001$, $d = .52$), that they had more right to participate in the conflict (4.22 vs. 3.48; $t(444) = 10.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.05$), and that they even had more chance of changing the other person's mind than the other person did (2.99 vs. 2.71; $t(444) = 3.88$, $p < .001$, $d = .14$). They were not avoiding because they felt they had a weak position on the matter. We found no difference in estimated importance of the issue to self and other (2.63 vs. 2.54; $t(444) = 1.42$, $p = .16$).

We will now move to a thematic discussion of our results. We found various themes and connected phenomena, and those will be our focus in what follows.

Where Do People Go?

Our research question, of course, asked where people go when they avoid conflicts, what they did instead, and why. We began the project with the understanding that people could avoid a conflict physically (e.g., by leaving a room) or mentally (e.g., by ignoring what the other person was saying). They could "leave" during the conflict, or they might foresee the conflict and maneuver away before it started. They could avoid substantive engagement by faking agreement. We coded for all these things, but because we anticipated them we also asked closed-ended questions about them.

Table 3 shows basic results bearing on the location of "away," based on our closed-ended questions. About half the sample (52%) avoided physically, and the identical number avoided mentally. Somewhat fewer (39%) enacted their avoidance during the conflict. For those who left physically, we asked whether they went to a familiar (vs. new) place and most (85%) did. Similarly, most (75%) of those who left mentally thought about "a familiar thing," not a new one. When people avoided by changing the topic during the conflict, 71% moved to a familiar idea. In all these cases, the "away" was a well-known place, more pleasant in the moment than the brewing conflict.

Physical, mental, and in-progress avoidances were not alternatives and could have co-occurred in any combination. Respondents answered our closed-ended questions independently, so they could say yes or no to whether they engaged in any of the main sorts of avoidances we anticipated. About 17% of respondents reported only physical avoidance, 12% only mental avoidance, and 13% said they only avoided during the conflict. However, several combinations of avoidance paths appeared: 18% did both physical and mental avoidance, 5% did both physical and in-progress avoidance, 10% did mental and in-progress avoidance, and 9% said they did all three. This left 17% who answered "no" to all these questions but still self-selected as having avoided a conflict. We interpret this last result to suggest that our simple

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for nominal or ordinal closed-ended questions

	N	%
Avoid physically?	414	52
Familiar place (new)?	171	85 (15)
Avoid mentally?	414	52
Familiar thing (new)?	181	75 (25)
Avoid during?	408	39
Topic change familiar (new)?	137	71 (29)
Plan ahead of time?	421	20
Fake resolution?	397	26
Ruminate?	431	63
Have had conflict before	413	44
Will have conflict again	370	53
I started it	392	28
Other started it	392	69
Third party started it	386	15
I have avoided this topic/person before	360	56
Other has avoided this before	363	29

Note. Values of *N* vary because respondents who replied "don't know" are omitted here.

categorization system is incomplete or that our wording of the questions did not quite match how respondents thought about their actions. All three main avoidance routes were often selected, indicating that avoiders have many choices about where to go and how to get there. The combination of physical action and avoidance during the conflict was most rare, perhaps because leaving physically while the conflict was under way might be unmistakably rude.

Our coding permits elaboration of these basic results.[1] For physical avoidance, we were able to classify people as leaving the room (33%), terminating communication (e.g., by hanging up the phone; 26%), or going for a drive or walk (3%). Examples of these three possibilities include "My boss took her to the conference room and I went to my own station and completed the pending files and work," "I denied her request on Venmo and stopped replying to her texts," and "Got in my car and drove off." Our coders were able to determine that respondents felt that physical avoidance was not possible in 31% of the cases, so nearly all the time that physical avoidance seemed possible (69%) our respondents took the opportunity to leave in one of these three physical ways (totaling 62%).

Coders developed a somewhat longer list of where people went when they avoided mentally. Fully 58% of those people ignored the possible conflict, for example, "I just tuned her out." The second most common means of mental avoiding was a topic change, at 18%: "I stopped talking about the topic we were on and changed the subject." A pointed focus on some other task accounted for another 13% of these respondents: "I moved my attention from him and started helping customers after backing away." Distraction constituted 7% of the mental avoidances: "I stopped listening and started looking at my phone so their attention went to my fiancée," but also "Distracted myself, focused on school, played

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[1]Respondents' answers to closed-ended questions rarely lined up precisely with our coding of parallel matters. For instance, for 42 people who said that they did not avoid the conflict physically, we still coded that 31 left the room, 10 terminated communication, and 1 went for a drive or walk. (The closed-ended question was "Did you avoid the conflict PHYSICALLY, maybe by leaving or hanging up the phone or not responding to a text?") Also apparent in this section of Results is that 52% of respondents directly said that they avoided physically, but we coded 62% as actually having done so. We attribute these discrepancies in results to differing interpretations of the constructs by coders and respondents, and, considering the consensus procedures for the coders, a higher likelihood of mistakes by the respondents.

video games, watched movies." Using alcohol or drugs summarized another 3% of the mental avoiding, and video games accounted for another 1%. We coded that respondents made remarks indicating that mental avoidance was not possible about 33% of the time, but we accounted for the "away" in mental avoidance for many of the other cases, totaling as much as 59% of the time.

Avoidance during the conflict could of course be physical or mental, but we wanted to have some idea of how avoiding was enacted once the conflict was under way. As Table 1 reports, only 61% of the conflicts actually began, so quite a few were avoided before they really got started. In all, 39% of conflicts exhibited respondent avoidance once the conflict became apparent. Here are some typical examples of respondents' reports: "I blocked everybody on social media and my phone"; "I summoned the children to the room and started handing out gifts to shift the focus away from me long enough to formulate a backup plan and place a call to myself to provide an excuse to leave the party"; "I tried defusing the situation I guess you could say. I focused on reducing the stress my father was feeling by simply agreeing with him, providing small reasons behind poor behavior, taking responsibility, and reassuring him that things will get better"; and "I talked to her about a TV show so that she won't get angry at me for passive aggressively mentioning the dishes." We can observe a variety of available tactics here, mainly differing from the actions we coded as physical or mental avoidance in regard to their timing.

A particular technique for avoidance during a conflict was faking agreement or making an insincere concession. A quarter (26%) of our respondents said that they used this tactic to avoid genuine engagement (Table 3), but our coding was only able to find explicit evidence of this in 13% of the cases (Table 1). Examples of this tactic included "I tried to lie my way through to get the conflict over with," "I minimized the amount of fighting and told him that his kids had been sufficiently punished when in fact, I think they deserved a little bit worse than a few time outs by me," and "I let the guy think he was right." We can see both active and passive deception here, as well as a willingness to let things go even when the outcome does not seem to be precisely right.

We can summarize all these details into a general answer to the question, Where do avoiders go? Often they go to different physical places or, conversely but equivalently, exclude the conflictive conversation from their immediate context (e.g., by cutting off electronic connections or sending a child to her room). Mental avoidance was equally common, sometimes leaving one's body present but one's mind far away. Either of these general approaches were available during the conflict, but quite a few of the conflicts never started. This indicates to us that the avoidance occurred before any discussion of an issue took place. Avoidance seems well adapted to foreseeable conflicts. Faking agreement was a tactic particularly well suited to conflicts that were under way. Like other sorts of avoidance, this merely pushes the possibility of engagement into the future, but we should not lose sight of the fact that not all conflicts need to be resolved, and that people are often content simply to let a disagreement or challenge evaporate (Vuchinich, 1990). These considerations invite attention to two more large issues that are turning out to have important connections to avoidance: anticipation and recognition of the conflict.

The First Spark of Avoidable Conflict

Some people (39%; Table 1) reported that they avoided conflicts that had not begun. Obviously, those conflicts must have been foreseeable. When people reported that the conflict did not really start, they might have meant that an entire interaction never took place or that during a conversation a topic might have been mentioned but was shut down before it could develop into a conflict. Either way, a person would need to make a quick projection in order to head something off.

In quite a few cases, the mere appearance of a particular topic was a suitable warning of trouble ahead. In 44% of our cases, people reported that they had had that conflict before, and 53% of the time, they predicted that they would have the conflict again (Table 3). These are serial arguments, of course, and people learn to recognize them. Researchers have often found respondents reporting a dozen or more episodes of a single recurring serial argument (Hample, 2018, ch. 4). Serial arguments have a past and

often a future in a relationship, so they may seem to offer some room to choose a moment for engagement. We thought therefore that serial arguments might be avoided because the immediate moment was inappropriate (that time, that place, etc.), but we found the opposite. When the possible conflict was recognized as another instance of a serial argument, the appropriateness of enacting the conflict was actually *higher* than when the conflict was not part of a serial pattern (3.36 vs. 2.95; $t(411) = 3.46$, $p < .001$, $d = .34$). Similarly, when the conflict was recognized as one that would likely recur, the appropriateness of undertaking the conflict was higher than when there was no such recognition (3.44 vs. 2.90; $t(368) = 4.45$, $p < .001$, $d = .46$).

Obviously, these findings need to be replicated, but here the unfamiliar and perhaps more surprising conflicts (i.e., not recognizable as serial ones) were those that seemed to be inappropriate. Perhaps these issues seemed intrusive in some respect. Readers will recall that both physical and mental avoiders preferred familiar places and tasks, so perhaps this is a re-expression of people wishing to escape unexpected situations. Another bit of evidence for the importance of familiarity is the presence of avoidance patterns for the serial arguments. When people reported that they recognized the conflict as a recurring one, they were also quite likely (81% vs. 19%) to say that they themselves had avoided that very conflict before ($\chi^2(1, N = 398) = 131.08$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .57$).

Conflicts can develop during an interaction. Perhaps a conversation takes an unexpected turn, or perhaps an interaction slowly aims itself toward an unwelcome experience. We were interested to discover what constituted the warnings of conflicts that were avoided. We coded what signaled to our respondents that they needed to avoid the conflict. The most common thing was a threat to the relationship (31%), closely followed by a threat to one's self-image (26%). Also noticeable were the threat of an emotional explosion (21%) and the threat of violence (19%). Less common was a threat to the other person's sense of self (4%). Several of these findings replicate work that showed some arguments are avoided because of relationship or face concerns (Rancer, Baukus, & Infante, 1985; Rancer, Kosberg & Baukus, 1992). We will discuss violence separately below. Here, we see that relational harm, personal harm, or physical/emotional explosion described the things that were actually being avoided and protected against.

We followed up on this interest by coding for the catalysts for avoidance. We understood "catalyst" to have a more general or climatic sense than the more concrete "signals" just summarized. Our reading of the free answers suggested several matters that we could notice, and these modify the simpler warnings just reported. We had difficulty with some of these codes, especially for those things that were infrequent (Table 1). The most common consideration was the respondent's own feelings, which appeared as a catalyst 43% of the time. Also common was a violation of the respondent's expectations for the interaction, at 30%. Sometimes, the catalyst was some threat to the avoider's group identity (e.g., as a woman), and this was apparent to our coders in 10% of the answers. Less frequent catalysts were time pressure (3%) and general stress (3%). These last two findings might be surprising until one remembers that these are reports of conflicts that were avoided, and so avoidable. Matters that are urgent because of time pressure or stress levels are not as likely to have been avoided (e.g., Morgeson & DeRue, 2006). These catalysts reflect participants' subjective experiences of the interaction, coloring it with emotionality, self-identity, and expectations about the encounter. These catalyst concerns may well interact with the signals (e.g., relational relevance) to help explain the decision to avoid.

They may also have influenced interpretation of the conflict's potential stakes (Hample, Dai, & Zhan, 2016). We were able to divide these into three classes. Relational stakes were apparent to us 41% of the time, and emotional stakes in 50% of the accounts. Possible loss of material resources (e.g., money and time) could be coded in 11% of the episodes. We see here, as we did for the catalyst coding, that the main character of avoided episodes was emotional and relational, and that only rarely did concrete matters dominate the decision to leave the field.

So we can offer some guidance as to the felt experience of conflicts that people thought they should avoid before they appeared, developed fully, or got worse. Although our data are Western, some of our results match themes that appear to some degree in studies of contrasting cultures as well (e.g., Kim &

Leung, 2000). Avoidance did not seem to have been dictated by substantial matters, such as lack of information about the topic, an inability to marshal good arguments, a low capability to satisfy the other party, or even confusion as to why the issue was present. Instead, people escaped conflicts that were emotionally hurtful, posed dangers to the relationship, or were unexpected (because they violated the respondent's expectations for the episode). Many of the emotional worries were personal, but some were about the other person's feelings or about the health of the relationship between the two people.

Avoiding Violence

And some of it had to do with violence. We coded people's descriptions as to whether physical or emotional violence was possible in these episodes, and 18% gave evidence that physical violence was a possibility, and 59% felt that verbal violence was possible. Males (57%) supplied more of the reports showing worry about physical violence than females did (43%; $\chi^2(1, N = 429) = 14.39$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .18$). We found almost no evidence at all of actual physical violence. In one case, a bar-sited competition for a woman's attention resulted in a man pouring ice water on the respondent. Another instance involved walking past a hostile-acting person late at night. An umpire had a baseball thrown at him to protest a disputed call. Another episode involved a rule-breaking tackle in a rugby game. A particularly distressing example involved an angry stranger punching a car window, while the respondent and his children were inside. But it is fair to say that within our sample of 446 stories, very few involved actual physical violence.

However, concern about violence is substantially more widespread than its appearance, especially in interpersonal conflict. Hample and Benoit (1999) and Hample, Benoit, Houston, Purifoy, VanHyfte, and Wardell (1999) triangulated the finding that the more apparent it is to people that they are explicitly engaged in an argument, the more destructive potential they see in the episode. In those studies, destructive potential referred to physical, emotional, or relational damage. Hample (2005, pp. 26–27) summarized evidence indicating that people's scripts for interpersonal conflicts include a "slot" for violence. This does not mean that people necessarily expect violence to occur whenever a disagreement does. It means that if violence happens, they know at what point it will occur. It is part of their schemata for face-to-face disagreement. Violence is among the worst possible outcomes for an interpersonal conflict, and so its threat is weighed out of proportion to its probability.

As we reported above, the possibility of physical violence signaled the prudence of avoidance in 18% of respondents' descriptions. It would be sensible for someone attuned to the possibility of physical violence also to take note of verbal aggression, which is a common precursor to domestic violence (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989). We coded the presence of verbal violence in 24% of the episodes and also determined that emotional violence appeared in 58% of them. These would sensibly have contributed to a sense of unease or concern about the projected development of the disagreement.

Violence was more atmospheric than observable in our data set. Nevertheless, it could have a powerful influence on people's decisions to avoid or not. When we coded that respondents thought physical violence was possible, 68% left the conflict physically ($\chi^2(1, N = 405) = 8.14$, $p < .01$, $\phi = .14$). In contrast, evidence that physical violence was possible did not influence respondents' decision to leave mentally or not, with only 45% of them escaping mentally ($\chi^2(1, 406) = 1.75$, $p = .19$). The prospect of violence prompted the most unmistakable avoidance, the departures that offered the clearest bodily protection.

The Future of Avoided Conflicts

Avoiding a particular episode of a conflict does not always mean that the conflict has been concluded (but see Vuchinich, 1990). For one thing, as we have noticed at several points, many of these conflicts were serial arguments, implying the nearly certain likelihood that the issue would be revisited. Importance of the avoided conflicts was rated at about the theoretical midpoint of the scale (Table 2). While

this indicates that the current (or projected) episode may not have been urgent, it also implies that the issue had some importance, both to self and other.

We wondered whether our respondents continued to think about the avoided conflict. Did the avoidance dissipate the issue, or did people feel that they needed to prepare themselves for some future encounter? As Table 1 reports, 66% of respondents planned for a future encounter with that person on that topic. We asked about those plans and coded them as to their general tenor: 37% seemed constructive to our coders, 6% seemed clearly destructive, and 23% involved more avoidance. This last result is worth notice: In contrast to our community research record in which avoidance is mainly the absence of something interesting, our respondents actually fastened onto avoidance as a substantial plan.

We understood planning to have some tactical character. Rumination, in contrast, is mainly a cognitive and emotional experience of reviewing, reliving, and anticipating some past or prospective action (Honeycutt, 2003; Martin & Tesser, 1996; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). We directly asked people whether they thought about the episode afterward, and 61% answered affirmatively. This was important enough in respondents' understandings of the events that they left us codable evidence of rumination in 60% of the descriptions. We classified the content of their ruminative thoughts as follows: festering anger (49%), how to do better in the future (29%), regret (12%), and how to avoid again (10%). For example, "What a lying piece of crap she was"; "I'm tired of being talked down to by this person. It is going to be addressed"; "I thought about how the conversation should go"; "We were both very sorry and we did not mean to upset each other"; and "I thought about that I didn't want to talk about it or think about it and I just wanted to avoid talking about it."

Some of the ruminative thoughts were productive and concretely tactical, but the majority were very negative. Anger, regret, aggression, revenge, and a sort of internal emotional escalation were common in our data set. Based on the postavoidance thoughts that respondents shared with us, it appears that avoidance is not often satisfying, at least in the middle term. In the moment, respondents felt they needed to escape, but they were not often happy about it when they spontaneously reflected on their experience.

Avoidance is only for the moment. After the avoidant move has been made—the topic changed, the room left, the attention diverted—the unfinished conflict continues to live in respondents' thoughts. People think about what to do in the future, and some of their plans seemed to be useful. This suggests that they might have wanted to do well in the first place, but got rushed. This kind of avoidance circumstance might be constructive because it allows people to get themselves settled to manage the conflict well. However, we also found a lot of anger, frustration, and negative focus when people thought about the episode they escaped. Carrying this unhappy emotional load into the next episode might sabotage any good intentions or might lead directly into destructive action. Sometimes, people simply want to continue avoiding the actual interactions, but they still think about them.

Conclusions

This has been a descriptive study, intended mainly to provide a platform for more pointed work concerning avoidance, work we hope will be undertaken. We have tried to emphasize that avoiding is substantial and observable behavior, not merely the absence of the actions more traditionally studied. We have tried to be helpful in pointing out motives for going to other places, rather than merely motives for not engaging. We have done some work to characterize those other places so that they can be sorted out and studied on their own. We have offered some detail about the relevance of physical, verbal, and emotional violence in interpersonal conflicts, even when those possibilities are more feared than experienced. The nature and timing of avoidance are also detailed here, as is its aftermath both in terms of cognitive planning and emotional rehashing. Avoiding is travel to a place, not merely away from one, and we hope to have made this clear enough to ground future investigation.

Our aim in this article has been to describe the experience of conflict avoidance. In truth, there is no away. People go to specific places, they undertake particular actions, they glance not merely away but at

concrete things, and they engage themselves in certain patterns of thought. We can see that these "places" have valences of their own. Avoidance is partly explained by the impulse to flee the conflict, but it is also partly explained by the pull of the alternative experience. People leave the jarring, the threatening, and the unwelcome, but they also head toward the familiar and the quieter.

Sometimes people can clearly foresee trouble on the horizon, and they evade engagement before the conflict even begins in earnest. More often, the conflict begins and people realize that they very much want to be somewhere else. They leave, they ignore, and they agree insincerely—they do what they must to interfere with what they project the natural trajectory of that conflict engagement to be. The need to avoid is urged by the prospect of relational or emotional harm. People worry about violence quite often. Although it appeared rarely in our data, we should consider the possibility that this might be because our respondents saw its possibility clearly and acted capably to head it off. Or it may be that even an ambiguous signal of physical, verbal, or emotional violence is sufficient cause to leave the arena.

Once avoided, a conflict episode is not gone. It persists in people's thoughts. They consider what happened and often become angry. They anticipate another opportunity to engage this person on that issue, and they work out what they will do. Their plans are often constructive, but almost as often they are avoidant.

Several of our results strike us as being particularly energizing for future research and theorizing. At the theoretical level, we believe that avoidance needs to be conceptualized as a coping mechanism that responds to both a push and a pull. The push implies stress—about one's relationship, one's self, one's feelings, one's job security, or one's safety—and it is the stress that calls out the coping. Avoidance is one way to cope, and the attractiveness of this path can be magnified by the familiarity and positive valence of the places people go, the alternative behaviors they engage in, or the mental experiences they generate. As the literature we summarized indicated, avoidant coping is not necessarily inappropriate or unhealthy. The coping literature is plentiful, and close examination of it might well expose very specific possibilities for particular avoidance tactics, motivations, and outcomes. At the more mundane level of affecting our typical research designs, our paper suggests adding some additional instrumentation to follow up on reports of avoidance. The motives for avoidance are outlined here, as are means and timing. Knowing more about the nature of avoidance might well produce informatively contrasting information that could deepen our understandings of cooperation, integration, negotiation, and other conflict patterns. Finally, our findings about rumination seem to suggest that the immediate relief of avoidance is often followed by a sort of cognitive and emotional hangover. We might reasonably expect these private experiences to set the stage for participating in the next conflict, either on that topic or on another one. Some sorts of avoidance might make future constructive conflict patterns less likely.

Avoidance is an affirmative action, as much as negotiating, integrating, and dominating are. Similarly, it has its own concrete objective (riding in the car, daydreaming about the weekend, finding peace in an atmosphere of upset). Rather than falling out of the conflict, avoiders often seem merely to retime it. We believe that a more thorough understanding of avoiding will reflect back on our other theories to suggest, by contrast, more precise explanations of the various ways people actually engage in conflicts.

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