

How boards manage the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness: Illuminating the four board conflict climates

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Abstract

Research Question/Issue: Although both cognitive conflict and cohesiveness are quintessential for a supervisory board to fulfill its monitoring and advisory role, cognitive conflict may equally create tension that negatively affects board cohesiveness and performance. How boards manage this tension between conflict and cohesiveness is the key concern of this paper.

Research Findings/Insights: Analysis of the multicase data from 17 Dutch two-tier supervisory boards reveals that how boards manage the tension between conflict and cohesiveness depends on three attributes: (a) board cohesiveness, (b) the board's conflict norms formation and (c) the board's dominant conflict management style. These attributes shape volatile board conflict climates. Four conflict climates are identified: (a) compliance climate, (b) pseudocohesive climate, (c) conflict climate, and (d) agree-to-disagree climate.

Theoretical/Academic Implications: Our study makes three contributions. First, it suggests that boards avoid conflict but are nonetheless often not cohesive. Second, it reveals that boards have conflict management styles that include action patterns distinct from those reported in the extant literature since these patterns emerged from exploring what board members think and feel but do not openly say. Third, we develop new insights into how boards implicitly and continuously form conflict norms and propose that boards require explicit, conscious, and shared conflict norms to enact productive conflict management action patterns.

Practitioner/Policy Implications: A conceptual model is proposed that facilitates reflection of board decision-making and effectiveness and that maps out actions the boards can take to address the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness.

KEYWORDS

corporate governance, supervisory boards, decision-making, conflict management, climates

1 | INTRODUCTION

Supervisory boards are critical to organizational success. They are considered the “apex of the firm's decision control system” (Fama &

Jensen, 1983, p. 311) and are the formal connection between the shareholders and the executives entrusted with the day-to-day functioning of the organization (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). Considering boards' strategic importance, it is imperative to know how boards

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make decisions. However, boards are hard to penetrate (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). Consequently, there is an increasing call in the literature for opening up this black box of board decision-making (Bailey & Peck, 2011; Boivie et al., 2016; Finkelstein & Mooney, 2003; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Veltrop et al., 2020; Westphal & Bednar, 2005).

Moreover, few scholars have addressed the fundamental question of how boards meet the two critical criteria that simultaneously shape board performance, that is, cohesiveness and cognitive conflict (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). Cognitive conflict involves “disagreements about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions” (Forbes & Milliken, 1999, p. 258), while the ability to continue working together is evidenced by cohesion. Although both criteria are quintessential for a supervisory board to fulfill its monitoring and advisory role, cognitive conflict may create tension that negatively affects board cohesiveness and thus performance (Forbes & Milliken, 1999).

Only a small number of studies have addressed and confirmed that boards face this convoluted tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict. These studies (a) reveal that board members downplay conflict because of its negative connotation (Kerwin et al., 2011); (b) report “the nonresolution of paradoxes” and “the dominance of conformance” (Carroll et al., 2017, p. 606); (c) show a tendency toward nonexecutives silencing their concerns (Westphal & Bednar, 2005) or nonexecutives and executives responding poorly to these concerns (Westphal & Khanna, 2003; Westphal & Zajac, 2013; Zhu, 2013); and (d) suggest the importance of psychological safety (Veltrop et al., 2020) and a supportive culture to promote cognitive conflict (Boivie et al., 2021). Despite this body of literature, little effort has been made to explore the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness directly and systemically.

Therefore, in this paper, we inductively explore the question: How do boards manage the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness? Specifically, we collected rare, rich, and thick data from 17 Dutch two-tier boards, observed and tape-recorded 19 meetings and conducted 119 interviews with the board members about these meetings. We focused on recording answers to two questions: “What were you thinking and feeling during the board meeting?” and “What kept you from voicing what you were thinking and feeling?” Then, we analyzed and compared what was said during the board meeting with board members' reconstruction of the board meeting, including their unspoken thoughts and feelings and narratives.

Three key factors emerged from our data as important to board performance. First, we identified “board cohesiveness,” shaped by the perceived temperature and levels of unsaid. Specifically, we found that the higher the levels of unsaid the higher the process conflict and the higher the levels of affective conflict. Second, we identified “the board's conflict norms formation” and found that boards continuously and implicitly develop conflict norms depending on the perceived power difference of the perceived antagonists and protagonists of the conflict. Third, we identified the “board's dominant conflict management style,” which is shaped by the dominant action patterns that prompt boards either to promote or to avoid cognitive conflict.

From these three categories, we identified four distinct board climates that explain how boards manage the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness. These board climates result from and are continuously shaped by an interplay of the board's conflict norms formation and the board's dominant conflict management style, which continuously emerge from board cohesiveness. We labelled these climates “compliance climate,” “pseudocohesive climate,” “open conflict climate,” and “agree to disagree climate.”

This paper makes three distinct theoretical contributions. First, contrary to Forbes and Milliken's (1999) suggestion that effective boards should promote cognitive conflict, our data reveal that 16 out of 17 boards avoid cognitive conflict as they implicitly assume that sharing their perceptions and opinions would automatically elicit process (Bailey & Peck, 2011) and affective conflict (Mooney et al., 2007) and assume it will reduce board cohesiveness. Our data, however, also show that even though board members apply conflict avoidance strategies to maintain cohesiveness, boards are not cohesive, even when individual board members perceive the board to be cohesive. Second, this study offers new insights concerning how boards can indeed manage the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness and suggests that “board reflexivity” (Pieterse et al., 2011) and explicit, shared conflict norms (Perlow & Repenning, 2009) will help increase task commitment and mitigate the negative effects of cognitive conflict on affective conflict and cohesiveness (DeChurch et al., 2013). These findings corroborate and emphasize the relevance and risk of naive realist bias (Pronin et al., 2004), false attribution (Ross, 2018), false consensus bias (Ross et al., 1977) and defensive routines (Argyris, 1992) on decision-making. Third, our study suggests that boards have distinct CMSs. We identified seven action patterns that do not correspond with the extant conflict management literature. As we were able to observe what was said as well as what was not said but felt, we identified conflict management action patterns that cannot easily be detected through surveys.

Because this research attempts to build theory inductively using qualitative data, we begin with a brief overview of prior research that laid the groundwork for our analysis, and then we describe our study and present the findings. In Section 4, we explore the theoretical contributions of our findings and their implications for helping advance research on board dynamics and decision-making toward understanding board effectiveness.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Board work and conflicts

Forbes and Milliken (1999) propose that the most effective boards are capable of reconciling the paradoxical tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness. Board members, however, encounter many barriers and dilemmas that are detrimental to decision-making (Boivie et al., 2016; Carroll et al., 2017). Supervisory boards are large and diverse groups that meet only occasionally, are highly interdependent due to an inverted pyramid power structure (Garg &

Eisenhardt, 2017) and are responsible only for monitoring and servicing the organization, not for implementing strategic decisions or for day-to-day administration (Fama & Jensen, 1983). Additionally, as part-timers with limited exposure to the firm, nonexecutives offer perspectives that differ from those of the executives who run the firm full-time (Veltrup et al., 2020). Consequently, these studies suggest that these many barriers negatively impact cognitive conflict, board cohesiveness or both.

In the corporate governance literature, little is known about board conflict. Although Forbes and Milliken introduced “cognitive conflict” in their seminal article of 1999, we draw mostly on conflict management literature to gain insights about conflict on teams. Conflict management scholars distinguished two types of conflicts in addition to cognitive conflict: process conflict and affective conflict. Process conflict refers to a conflict that concerns the means to accomplish the specific tasks, that is, not the content or substance of the task itself but the strategies for approaching the task (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Martínez-Moreno et al., 2009). Hence, task conflict may involve cognitive conflict and/or process conflict. Affective conflict is individual-oriented disagreement arising from personal disaffection (Amason & Sapienza, 1997).

Jehn and Bendersky (2003) note that although different types of conflicts can be distinguished, in practice, they are often interrelated. Moreover, research on more traditional teams documents a strong interrelation between idea-based tasks or cognitive conflict and emotionally laden affective conflict (De Wit et al., 2013; DeChurch et al., 2013; Jehn, 1997; Medina et al., 2005; Mooney et al., 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When task or cognitive conflict increases cognitive load, it also interferes with effective cognitive processes (e.g., Carnevale & Probst, 1998) and may result in narrow, black and white thinking and affective conflicts (De Dreu et al., 2008).

The most common explanation for this effect is that people tend to erroneously think that their views are shared more by others than they actually are; this tendency is known as the false consensus effect (Ross et al., 1977). This assumption creates problems when people's opinions are unexpectedly refuted, such as in a disagreement caused by a second phenomenon, naive realism. Naive realism is a person's “unshakable conviction that he or she is somehow privy to an invariant, knowable, objective reality - a reality that others will also perceive faithfully, provided that they are reasonable and rational” (Pronin et al., 2004, p. 781). Therefore, when others misperceive that reality, it must be because they are irrational or have bad intentions. When these biases occur while discussing a problem, a controversial sticking point can emerge, which can be difficult to solve, as affective conflicts are very difficult to manage (Edmondson & Smith, 2006). According to Jehn and Bendersky (2003), the opportunity for productive conflict is found specifically in the ability to distinguish among conflict types and the factors that influence their impact on group performance.

2.2 | Conflict management norms, conflict norms formation and conflict styles

The ways teams manage their conflicts can be infinite. Kuhn and Poole (2000) and Bettenhausen and Murnighan (1985) assert that

action and reaction patterns, or “conflict management styles,” guide teams (though often not consciously) through episodes of conflict when individuals face oppositions and disagreements. These conflict management styles are shaped by norms, which result from an interplay among individual members' “scripts.” According to Kuhn and Poole (2000), the process of conflict norms formation is complex and depends on the unique combination of individual scripts and styles that exists in a group and on the resources available to members to influence others to adopt and maintain a particular stylistic choice.

Although labelling differs across theories (De Dreu et al., 2001; De Wit et al., 2013; Euwema et al., 2003; Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001), we draw on Ayoko and Konrad (2012), who delineate five conflict handling modes or action patterns to describe conflict management in teams: that is, competing, accommodation, collaboration, compromise, and avoidance. Competing refers to a situation where each party pursues its own interests. It focuses on winning and imposing one's will on others. It involves persuasive arguments and positional commitments along with threats and bluffs. Accommodation refers to “giving in to the opponent” (Euwema et al., 2003, p. 121). It is oriented toward accepting and incorporating others' opinions, perceptions and will. It involves servicing others' needs, unilateral promises and concessions. Collaboration refers to an attempt to solve problems by integrating the interests of all involved parties (Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001). It is oriented toward a win-win agreement and satisfying both one's own and others' perspectives as much as possible. It involves a rich exchange of information, including information concerning priorities, preferences and insights. Avoidance refers to “moving away from the conflict issue” (Euwema et al., 2003, p. 121). It is oriented toward avoiding confrontations with other people. Compromise refers to “settling through mutual concessions” (Euwema et al., 2003, p. 121).

According to Kormanski (1982), each conflict management behavior has both advantages and disadvantages. Ayoko and Konrad (2012) suggest that leaders who can thoughtfully and comprehensively apply many different conflict management strategies in the appropriate circumstances are likely to be the most effective. Thus, while it is widely accepted that conflict norms shape different types of conflicts through distinct conflict management styles, this study refines our understanding of how boards manage the tension between cognitive conflict and affective conflict since it disrupts board cohesiveness. Although cohesion is a very well researched area, these studies “have been dominated by confusion, inconsistency, and almost inexcusable sloppiness with regard to defining the construct” (Mudrack, 1989, p. 45). While definitions change, cohesion is mostly framed as task commitment and interpersonal attraction (e.g., Beal et al., 2003; Carron & Brawley, 2000). These scholars thus suggest that boards that lack task commitment (i.e., experience task conflict) and lack interpersonal attraction (i.e., experience affective conflict) are less cohesive. Forbes and Milliken (1999), however, refrain from defining cohesiveness clearly but merely connect the ability to continue working together to cohesion but state that this ability is a consequence of cohesion.

3 | RESEARCH APPROACH

Given the unique study context and the limited research on the topic, an inductive multiple-case study approach was chosen for this research study (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). This approach is suitable when seeking to answer a question such as ours (Kouamé & Langley, 2018; Langley & Tsoukas, 2011). Specifically, this study's embedded design has multiple levels of analysis: individual, dyad, and board. We deliberately limited this investigation to the confines of the boardroom, as that is the main arena in which nonexecutives formally discharge their duties, service the firm, make decisions, and hold the CEO accountable (Brennan et al., 2016).

3.1 | Sampling

Our sampling strategy was to maximize literal replication (Yin, 1994). Additionally, to enable comparability, we reflexively (Alvesson, 2003; Cunliffe, 2016) designed an approach and applied it to all boards. Our invitation letter to two-tier Dutch boards from the housing corporation sector explained the study purpose and the approach. Moreover, several prerequisites were set for boards to participate. First, all members agreed that the researcher was allowed to observe a meeting and that this meeting could be tape-recorded. Second, all board members agreed to participate in a confidential interview. Third, board members agreed that they helped plan the interviews within 2 weeks after the

TABLE 1 Case data

NR	Sector	Size	Number of non-executives interviewed	Number of executives interviewed	Number of female board members	Number of secretaries interviewed	Number of meetings observed	Emerging theories discussed with boards
1	Housing corporation	Small	4	2	2 out of 5	0	1	1
2	Housing corporation	Small	5	1	2 out of 5	0	1	0
3	Healthcare	Large	4	2	1 out of 6	0	1	1
4	Housing corporation	Small	4	2	1 out of 6	1	1	0
5	Housing corporation	Small	5	1	3 out of 6	0	2	1
6	Housing corporation	Small	5	2	1 out of 8	1	1	1
7	Housing corporation	Large	4	2	2 out of 6	1	1	0
8	Housing corporation	Small	5	1	2 out of 6	0	2	1
9	Housing corporation	Large	5	2	2 out of 7	1	1	1
10	Housing corporation	Small	6	1	2 out of 7	0	1	0
11	Housing corporation	Small	3	1	1 out of 4	0	1	0
12	Housing corporation	Small	5	1	2 out of 6	0	1	0
13	Housing corporation	Medium	5	2	2 out of 7	0	1	1
14	Housing corporation	Medium	6	1	3 out of 7	1	1	1
15	Housing corporation	Large	6	1	4 out of 8	1	1	0
16	Housing corporation	Medium	6	2	4 out of 6	0	1	0
17	Financial	Extra large	8	3	3 out of 11	0	1	1
	Total	17 boards	86 non-executives	27 executives	37 female out of 113 total	6 secretaries (1 female, 5 men)	19 observed meetings	9 presentations

Note: Small: up till 100 fte; Between: 100 and 500 fte; Large: between 500 to 1000 fte; Extra large: around 3000 fte.

meeting took place. Only boards that explicitly agreed to this approach were selected.

This study's sample comprises 17 two-tier Dutch boards, of which 15 are small (up to 100 fte), medium, (100 to 500 fte) or large housing corporations (500 to 1000 fte). The observations and interviews occurred in a 5-month period between August and December 2017. Before formally inviting boards, we piloted our approach with one board from the healthcare sector and one from the financial sector. Based on the transcripts of these two boards, we laid the foundation of the coding strategy of the full dataset. Each board had three to five nonexecutive directors, one CEO and one or two executive directors, all of whom participated in the meetings. In total, 119 board members were interviewed. Table 1 provides details of the case data. Since the first author was often allowed to observe more than one meeting, 19 board meetings were observed in total.

Our design enabled (a) answering the research question, (b) minimizing the effort and disturbance of boards and their ways of doing things, and (c) considering real and perceived risks of sharing confidential or sensitive information. The researchers offered maximum confidentiality at all levels, including the individual, board, and organization levels. The researchers assured board members that the information gathered and used in this research would never be traced back to the source. Moreover, as board members lack time, this research was designed to minimally disturb the board's decision-making and required a minimum investment of individual board members' time. Additionally, to compensate for their invested time, boards were offered insight into the aggregated findings while considering confidentiality arrangements. Ethical considerations drew on a "situated ethics perspective" (see also Calvey, 2008; Roulet et al., 2017), which means the first author reflected on issues that emerged from executing the research and, when in doubt, consulted with those involved and peers before deciding.

3.2 | Data collection and analysis in action

We observed and tape-recorded what board members said during the board meeting, as well as their recollections of what they thought they had said and what they thought and felt but did not say. More specifically, all board members present during the meeting were asked to reflect after the meeting but prior to the interview on the following questions: (a) "What were you thinking and feeling during the meeting?" and (b) "What kept you from saying it?" From theories on mind-reading (Nichols & Stich, 2003), a "referent shift" was used to assess board climates (Schneider et al., 2013) by adding the questions (c) "What did you think others were thinking and feeling?" and (d) "What do you think kept others from saying it?" We were conscious of the fact that "while the individuals might not precisely report the particulars of what was said, they are unlikely to be able to misrepresent the rules behind behaviour; given the nature of rule-learned behaviour, individuals cannot consistently play at a set of rules that they do not know or have competence in" (Argyris et al., 1985, p. 240). Board member recollections and tape recordings were used

to triangulate (Carter et al., 2014; Fusch et al., 2018; Jick, 1979) what had happened during the board meeting. In an iterative fashion, the first author analyzed qualitative data in action by travelling back and forth between the data to build an emerging structure of theoretical arguments (Gioia et al., 2013). This analysis utilized three major steps.

Step 1: "In-the-moment" theorizing in interviews regarding implicit silence theories and the effects of silencing. First, the first author and the interviewees reflected during the interview on what was thought and felt but not said and why not. Second, the greater the number of interviews that transpired, the greater the preliminary concepts, patterns and theories that emerged from previous interviews were voiced and tested in each interview.

Step 2: Creating and exploring preliminary theories regarding the patterns and effects of implicit silence theories at the board level. As it was possible to listen to the tape recordings after the interviews, this study compared what was said during the meetings and what board members remembered was said and not said during the meeting. Based on what was said during the meeting and what was said about what was silenced in the interview, the meeting was reconstructed. Each interview offered a specific piece of the story, and all accounts jointly presented a board's history and profile. The more within-case analyzes and board profiles that the first author developed, the more she was able to perform cross-case analyzes. She presented and tested to what extent her emerging constructs and propositions resonated with 9 out of 17 boards. After collecting and analyzing the data, the first author presented to and tested her findings with 120 members of different boards during an event organized by the association of nonexecutives of housing corporations.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the data structure that summarizes the process that we followed, which shows our first-order categories, the theoretical categories, and the aggregate theoretical dimensions. Specifically, the aggregate theoretical dimensions shown best explain how and why board members respond to perceived tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict.

4 | FINDINGS

From our data, we identified four conflict climates that explain how boards manage the tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict and its effects on board performance. According to Schneider et al. (2013) a climate consists of an experientially based description of what people "see" and report happening to them in an organizational situation (e.g., Rentsch, 1990; Schneider et al., 2013). Individuals can sense the climate upon entering a board through features such as the emotionality and attitudes exhibited by members of the organization and the experiences and treatment of new members.

In our inductive study, however, from which climate as a construct surfaced, we posit that the board climate is not just an experientially based description of what board members "see" and report happening to them in their organizational situation but is shaped by the interplay of these three categories: (a) board cohesiveness, (b) the board's conflict norms formation, and (c) the board's dominant conflict

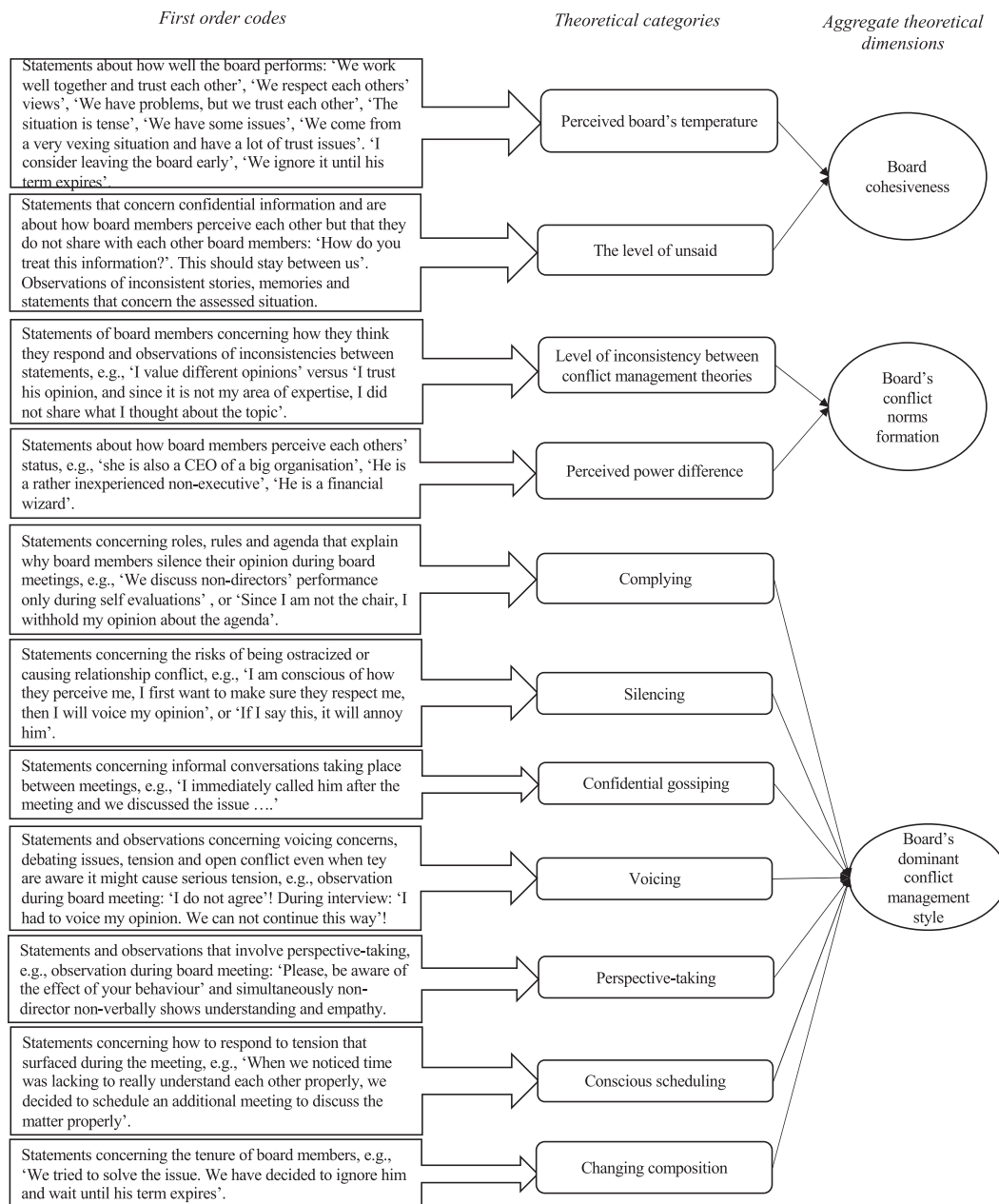


FIGURE 1 Overview of the data structure. All data were derived from observations of meetings and interviews. Observations are notes based on analyzing the misaligned statements and narratives between board members.

management style. Hereafter, we will explain how we determined these categories as defining the board climate.

4.1 | Board cohesiveness

With regard to board cohesiveness, we derived two key categories directly from informants' narratives: (a) the perceived board temperature and (b) "the level of unsaid." From our data, we inferred that the interplay of these two categories together shapes "board cohesiveness." When three board members assume "all goes well" but two board members silently experience a serious tension and thus silence

their perception formally, we assert that the interplay of this difference determines the higher-level construct. We found that it is not only a lack of task commitment but that process conflict often incites affective conflict which automatically reduces cohesiveness. Moreover, we found that it is not just process and/or affective conflict that reduces cohesiveness but the (differences in) perception concerning the board's temperature that shapes the individual board members perceived cohesiveness. In addition, it is not about the mean or averages as a single board member's silenced or ostracized perception can diminish the boards' cohesiveness. Last, we found cohesiveness is directly linked to board members contemplating (someone) leaving the board. Board members who experience higher temperatures and

TABLE 2 Level of misalignment concerning perceived cohesiveness

Board	Level of (misaligned) perceived temperatures	Example statements	Type of tension	Protagonist	Antagonist	Type of climate
1	Although all board members had aligned ideas on their issues (governance issues, CFO performance), their narratives were misaligned; in particular, the level of concern that board members experienced was different. Both the CEO and one nonexecutive mentioned in the interview that if the governance issue was not resolved in a timely manner, they would not stay on the board.	Nonexecutive (Interview 4): "The CEO is working hard on trying to solve the issues we have with the CFO, and it makes it hard to probe about it. She might become defensive because she wants us to trust that she is managing it well. However, I am still concerned about his behavior as he should have shared that information with us. We are depending on the information we receive from the CFO, so this is really unacceptable." CEO (Interview 1): "Who is monitoring who, I was asking myself." Nonexecutive (Interview 5): "I really do not like it that they did not tell me about this serious issue before I joined this board."	Cognitive, process, and affective conflicts	CEO Nonexecutives	Nonexecutives CFO/CEO	Open conflict
5	Board members said that they were facing a serious tension with the CEO, and they provided very different accounts on what was being discussed, what was needed, and who was accountable for the situation. Moreover, during a board meeting in which the CEO was absent and in which the first author presented her aggregated and preliminary findings, the tension unexpectedly increased when discussing the situation.	Chair (Interview 30): "I think it is best that I leave this board!"	Cognitive, process and affective conflicts	CEO Chair	Nonexecutive Nonexecutives	Open conflict
10	Board members intuitively assessed their situation in general as fine and similar, but a challenging topic unexpectedly arose during their meeting. When the chair addressed the transition of the chair and how to select a chair from the current nonexecutives, the tension immediately rose to high levels, and all board members mentioned this moment during the interviews but misaligned the assessment and analysis of the situation.	Nonexecutive (Interview 63): "We are truly working well together. Especially if I compare this board with the other board, I am in. Therefore, I was truly surprised about what happened when we spoke about the chair's transition. A lot was kept silent during that topic. I think the chair should have managed it differently."	Process conflict	Nonexecutives	Chair	Open conflict

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Board	Level of (misaligned) perceived temperatures	Example statements	Type of tension	Protagonist	Antagonist	Type of climate
3	Two executive board members shared aligned narratives with the first author about the current situation and experienced high levels of tension. The CEO even cried during the interview, but their narratives were very different from those of the nonexecutives and chair. The nonexecutives and especially the chair did not experience high levels of tension and conflict and were unaware of what the executives were experiencing. However, their narratives were misaligned.	CEO (Interview 16), Crying: "Even though they know of my personal situation, they never ask how I am doing, and they do not know what went on between me and the chair concerning my yearly evaluation. 'I do not want them to know how I feel, so I make sure I hide my emotions. I fear they will judge me when I show emotions. I have been talking about it with my executive members, and they too have similar issues with the board. One of the executives is even thinking of leaving this organization due to remarks made by the chair.'"	Cognitive, process and affective conflicts	Executives	Chair and nonexecutives	Open conflict
7	Both nonexecutives and executives mentioned that they had a serious issue with the chair. The chair, however, did not mention this tension and conflict in the interview. In contrast, the chair explained to the first author how he, as the chair, is responsible for managing the board and for listening to what is silenced and said and that he was proud of the board performance and how he was able to efficiently manage the meetings within the specified time. On this board, the collaboration of the two executives generated some tension, especially between them. Although some nonexecutives mentioned this tension, most of them did not seem to know the levels of tension that this conflict elicited between the executives and how nonexecutives were perceived to be responsible for that conflict.	Board secretary (Interview 42): "The style of the chair is disturbing. Several nonexecutives and the executives do not seem to appreciate his style and in particular his jokes or humour." Nonexecutive (Interview 46): "I think the speed should be such that you can process what is being said. I think now it is too high." Chair (Interview 41): "The role of the chair is to read what is not said. I always inquire into how nonexecutives think it is going. I am proud of how we operate. I am able to finish the meeting within the scheduled time frame."	Process conflict	Nonexecutives CEO	Chair CFO	Pseudo cohesive
16	The nonexecutive whom most board members mentioned in their interview was unable to join the interview due to a sudden illness. Additionally, the CFO mentioned that he thought nonexecutives should have discussed a strategic decision that the board should have decided upon, but due to a lack of time, the executives had not put it on the agenda. The CEO did not mention this tension in the interview.	"Time was of the essence, and therefore, they we did not put it on the agenda. A collective decision too late is equal to a bad decision than one that was taken without the deliberation of the whole board."	Process and affective conflict	CFO	Nonexecutives	Pseudo cohesive

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Board	Level of (misaligned) perceived temperatures	Example statements	Type of tension	Protagonist	Antagonist	Type of climate
2, 12	Some board members mentioned that they felt tension related to the chair's performance. In particular, one board member on Board 12 said that she felt concerned about the performance of the organization and that she needed time to discuss her concerns with other nonexecutives but without the CEO. The chair, according to her, however, did not agree. The chair did not mention this conflict in the interview and did not mention that the board was faced with a serious challenge. On Board 2, one nonexecutive criticized the chair for his dominance but said that it does not work to have two captains on a ship and decided to silence his observation.	"I have asked the chair to organize a meeting with only nonexecutives, but he does not agree because he thinks it will evoke feelings of distrust with our chair. So now, I do not know what to do. If I involve other nonexecutives, then the chair knows I do not respect his leadership."	Process conflict	Nonexecutives	Chair	Pseudo cohesive
15	The CEO said she had had serious concerns and frustrations with the nonexecutive director. Although both mentioned that they had discussed the conflict in the remuneration committee with the chair, other board members, not the chair, mentioned this conflict and the tension that the CEO and nonexecutive were experiencing.	CEO (Interview 100): "I am conscious that I sound judgemental, but I really think she does not understand how one should monitor an organization." Nonexecutive (Interview 96): "We (chair, CEO and nonexecutive) agreed that there is a misfit of approaches or culture. I would better fit in a smaller organization in which I can walk around and talk to employees directly." CEO (Interview 100): Aggressive tone of voice "What is your hypothesis; what are you going to tell the media about the outcomes of your research?"	Process and affective conflicts	CEO	Nonexecutive	Compliance
17	The CFO and a nonexecutive mentioned concerns in their interviews that were not mentioned by others. Both assumed it was not their place to express these concerns during the meeting. The CFO had concerns related to the topic that was discussed during the meeting but assumed that her emotions were irrelevant and therefore silenced her thoughts and feelings.	Executive (Interview 116): "[The] chairman leads the meeting and decides what we should discuss." Nonexecutive (Interview 119) "The chairman surprised me with his remark, and since I do not think this is a topic to discuss during a supervisory board, it did not feel appropriate to go into it properly."	Cognitive and Process conflict	CFO Nonexecutive	Chair	Compliance

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Board	Level of (misaligned) perceived temperatures	Example statements	Type of tension	Protagonist	Antagonist	Type of climate
8	The CEO had sensed serious tensions during the meeting when she felt attacked by the nonexecutives, but the nonexecutives (except for one) did not mention this specific moment during the meeting. On the contrary, they all complimented the CEO for her performance and how well she was leading the organization	Nonexecutive (Interview 49): "I am slightly worried about the CEO. Her response at the beginning of our meeting was rather unusual. I should have asked her what she was thinking."	Process conflict	CEO	Nonexecutives	Pseudo cohesive
13	Although the nonexecutives said that they think the organization is doing fine, the nonexecutives said they were struggling with their board meetings. Specifically, the meetings were perceived to be too long, and board members received too much information from the CEO. The chair told the first author that she did not know how to manage the CEO. Additionally, one nonexecutive said in the evaluation of the board meeting that he felt that his peer did not ask the right questions. Due to the tension that the conversation created, the chair suggested that they take this conversation offline. In the interviews, the tension between the two nonexecutives was mentioned by a few but not all board members.	Chair (Interview 82): "I have tried to limit the amount of information the CEO is sharing with us because it makes it hard to monitor the organization when you are swamped with detail. However, I think this is his way of managing his insecurity and way of involving us in his attempt to do it right."	Process conflict	Nonexecutives	Chair	Pseudo cohesive
4,6,11,14	On the remaining boards (4, 6, 11, 14), board members had misaligned accounts and experienced different levels of tension. A subgroup of board members in these boards experienced tensions with a peer who, according to them, did not perform according to expectations. This antagonist, however, did not mention this tension in the interview.	Nonexecutive (Board 14, interview 86): "She is always mentioning the same things, as if we do not already know her opinion on the matter." Nonexecutive (Board 14, Interview 92): "His focus is too financial, on KPI's, [but] we also have a societal task. It is as if he has a different purpose in mind than the rest [of the board members], including the CEO, and it is really making it hard to collaborate."	Process conflict	Nonexecutive	Nonexecutives	Pseudo cohesive
6	All narratives were aligned. Concerning the history of the narratives, the serious conflicts that they were facing, how they handled them and, moreover, during the formal meeting, one member shared his concern about the CEO's performance openly and transparently but also respectfully.	Nonexecutive (Interview 56): "Although we still face serious challenges, we are now a good team, but as you might know from what was written in the media about our situation, it was hard when we joined this board". Nonexecutive (Interview 53): "I am still not happy they decided to" "However, we did agree that if I feel concerned with how ... evolves, I can always revisit this decision."	Cognitive conflict	None	None	Agree to disagree

higher levels of unsaid, explicitly mentioned leaving the board as a solution that links directly to the ability to continue working together.

4.1.1 | Perceived board temperature

Our data reveal that among the 17 boards, board members of 16 boards perceive their situation differently but are unaware of these different perceptions. Hence, only board members of one board (Board 9) expressed (a) shared and aligned recollections; (b) shared and aligned narratives concerning one specific conflict that had previously elicited high levels of tension; and (c) shared narratives on how they had reconciled the tension. We consciously refer to “tension” instead of “conflict” because not all challenges elicit tension or are perceived as a conflict. In line with DeChurch et al. (2007, p. 67), we found that “a conflict is the substantive issue in which the tension is rooted.” Our data suggest that the intensity and the sharedness of the perceived tension shape the perceived board temperature. A heated debate triggers higher levels of tension and triggers the perception of a conflict more than a “cool” conversation in which different perspectives are explored respectfully (Kerwin et al., 2011). Concurring with what Edmondson and Smith (2006) posit, we noticed a clear distinction between “cool topics” which refers to topics that have a low risk for causing affective conflict and “hot topics” which refers to topics that trigger affective conflict due to differing belief systems and uncertainties that cannot be reduced by facts. We found that board members who did not have concerns perceived the board temperature as “cool” and assumed the board was cohesive; thus, they bracketed (Weick et al., 2005) different moments during the meeting, and assessed the meeting and the performance of peers differently than those who had concerns. See Table 2 for examples of misaligned perceived temperatures for different boards and example statements.

However, when all board members experienced high levels of tension, they discussed the same moment and issue during the interviews, but their recollections and narratives were different and often inconsistent.

Additionally, we discovered that even during the interviews, some board members expressed mixed statements concerning the perceived board temperature:

The nonexecutive in Interview 72 of Board 12, for example, expressed his analysis of the meeting, the tensions he was experiencing and the issues that the board was facing according to him, but at the end, he said, “Although I shared all kinds of issues with you, you should not infer that we or the organization are not doing well and that we do not work well together.”

Another example concerns Board 13:

From observing the meeting, the first author perceived the board as rather “hot” (looking at the number of topics on the agenda, the significant lengthier meeting

than other boards and the palpable irritation during the meeting) but learned during the interviews that board members offered mixed narratives of the board's temperature. When the first author probed how the chair perceived the board's temperature due to these mixed statements, she said, “We are actually doing very well, especially looking at our financial results and other KPIs.” (Interview 82)

Contrary to studies that propose that conflicts can be clearly distinguished, our findings suggest, as do De Wit et al. (2012), that cognitive conflicts and affective conflicts are perceived as highly connected and that specifically that board members fear that sharing concerns about specific topics would automatically and immediately raise the suspicion that they did not appreciate the performance of the person responsible for the topic. Thus, rather than assuming that certain “topics could trigger heated debate,” board members assume that raising concerns about specific topics could suggest criticism about a peer's performance (executive or nonexecutive) and assume that this suggestion would only automatically elicit tension. Moreover, distinguishing between cognitive conflict and process conflict and perceived temperature is challenging because board members assumed raising concerns about a topic might automatically elicit process and affective conflict, thus leading to a heated temperature. Lack of task commitment and interpersonal attraction are the two criteria that determine cohesiveness are thus assumed to be highly connected. Thus, it is not the topic itself that is assumed to elicit a heated cognitive conflict, but rather, the role and responsibility of the person who is perceived to be related to the topic is expected to elicit a process conflict (Bailey & Peck, 2011) and hence an affective conflict. For example, questions related to a tax policy would be viewed as a cue that the nonexecutive was unhappy with the CFO performance since the CFO is responsible for managing tax issues. Some CEOs unknowingly confirmed this assumption about their nonexecutives by stating that they actively monitored how nonexecutives framed their question to assess whether the nonexecutive was still happy with the CEO's performance.

I continuously and consciously monitor the dynamics between the board members and how they think the organization performs and make an assessment of what that implies for me. (Board 11, Interview 71)

Therefore, board members who are perceived to have the mindset to respond to “complicated situations” effectively and thus were also perceived to be able to discuss a colleague's performance openly and directly without causing heated debate are highly respected:

He knows how to ask difficult questions and express difficult observations in the correct way. I really admire him for that but am also concerned as his term expires soon. Who then will be able to do what he does! (Non-executive, Interview 23, Board 4)

Nonetheless, conflicts are highly connected, and we tried to identify which type of tension was most dominant on boards. See also Table 2, which shows how we identified different dominant types of tensions in different boards.

4.1.2 | The level of unsaid

As the first author interviewed board members sequentially after the board meeting, the first author's knowledge about what had been said during the meeting and what was not said but felt and thought by whom, already increased during the interview process. The first author noticed that board members had indeed not shared relevant information during the board meeting. Hence, the theoretical category "the level of unsaid" emerged from our data. We define the unsaid as the taken for granted, tacit, noncodified knowledge embodied in individual cognitions and memories (Guthrie, 1996; Johnson et al., 2002; Schraw & Moshman, 1995; Venkitachalam & Busch, 2012). Rather than referring to "information asymmetry" (Clarkson et al., 2007), we refer to the unsaid as information that some know that others do not know, which is withheld intentionally or unintentionally and hence cannot be refuted by the people who are excluded from this information.

I do not want them to know how I feel, so I make sure I hide my emotions. (CEO, Board 3, Interview 16)

We posit that the unsaid, a construct related to the construct "known unknown" (Chow & Sarin, 2002), exists in epistemological terms in the space between hard facts and pure fantasy and comprises "products from accumulated communication, memories and relations, sedimented into patterns of interpretations and presuppositions that we employ to understand social realities" (Fan et al., 2020, p. 3). The unsaid cannot be considered purely fantasy since it contains observations that include hard facts (Fan et al., 2020, p. 3). Although the unsaid cannot be considered valid, people who share what they think and feel confidentially or privately risk accepting this information, the product of sensemaking, as it is a form of "triangulation" of what is open knowledge, exploring what is going on "behind the scenes" and supplementing a certain understanding of organizational life. Some regard it as real and as accurate as the "truth" behind the "truth" (Stewart & Strathern, 2004, p. 38). The unsaid includes the perceptions that board members shared with the first author but had kept from (some of) their peers.

From exploring the inconsistencies between narratives, we infer that the unsaid concerns primarily inferences made by board members about each other's performance, effectiveness and trustworthiness. It thus identifies process and affective conflict. For example, a chair who observed a nonexecutive's response, a nonexecutive who felt unhappy with how the chair managed the meeting or a CEO who felt unhappy with the supervisory board's performance and speculations on why they acted the way they did. This inference is in line with

many theories of persuasion that take a "dual-mode" perspective: issue-relevant messages convey information that is directly relevant to the issue at stake and cue messages that relate to the trustworthiness of the sender but not to the issue (Dewatripont & Tirole, 2005). Especially when unusual things happen, we noticed board members tend, often unconsciously, to focus on the "cue message" and to fill in the blanks of what they do not know.

For example: "I guess they try to impress the researcher." (Executive, Interview 113, Board 17)

We also noticed higher levels of "unsaid" when the tension on the board intensified. Additionally, our data suggest that when board members do not address a tension (an assumed task conflict) that was correctly elicited earlier, it risks, through the unsaid, growing into a complicated conflict that can easily distort board cohesiveness as the conflict lowers the interpersonal attraction, which is precisely what most board members said they wanted to avoid in the interview.

Since we could not probe these inconsistencies due to confidentiality arrangements, we could not openly share our observations with board members and their boards. Hence, the higher the levels of unsaid we noticed within one board, the higher the levels of unsaid that emerged between the researchers and the board. However, our aggregated findings, which we presented and explored with 9 out of 17 boards during the research process and with 120 board members after finishing all the interviews, showed high levels of resonance (McDonnell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010) with our theoretical categories, including the unsaid, and issues concerning "cue messages" and hence unspoken, unshared but misaligned assessments about a peer's behavior during board meetings.

4.2 | Board's conflict norms formation

During the interview, we asked board members why they had not voiced what they had thought and felt during the board meeting. From analyzing their statements, two theoretical categories surfaced: (a) the level of inconsistency between conflict management theories and (b) the perceived power difference. From these categories, we identified the aggregate theoretical category "board norms formation." These board norms therefore do not emerge from aggregating individuals' conflict theories but are shaped by the interplay of *different* board members' implicit conflict management theories enacted by the dynamics between the individual board members, their status and roles. For example, one chair with more formal and often informal power and specific but different conflict management theories than the other board members can change the board conflict norms.

Example statement: "The new chair will have a big impact on group dynamics, so it is imperative that we choose the next chair consciously." (Board 10, Interview 67)

These findings corroborate the findings of Kuhn and Poole (2000) that norms are not just an aggregation of individuals' theories and those of Veltrop et al. (2017) that expertise differently impacts directors' social status and influence within the board. We will elaborate on these findings in the next paragraphs.

4.2.1 | Level of inconsistency between conflict management theories

Our data concerning why board members do not share what they think and feel suggests that although most board members openly and thus explicitly agree that they appreciate and should appreciate different perspectives and ideas, they often struggle silently with how, when and if they should voice their perspectives, ideas, opinions, knowledge, and concerns. Depending on how they (silently) assess board cohesiveness, they decide how to respond. From board members' explanation of why and how they responded in the board meeting, we identified different conflict management theories. See also Table 3 for exemplary statements that we coded as implicit conflict management theories.

We found that board members showed different levels of consciousness or taken-for-grantedness concerning how and why they responded in the meeting. Even board members who shared implicit conflict management theories were not fully aware of their theories and became aware of them only when the first author presented her findings with this board. We found in particular that when board members were conscious of a lingering problem and already experienced tension prior to the meeting, they would assess the dynamics and the implicit conflict norms attentively and would respond more consciously.

For example: "She (the new board member) suggested that we should modify our way of working, and I expected the chair to respond irritably because I assumed he could perceive it as an attack, but I was very surprised that he in fact valued her response. It made me aware that we can share more ideas than we normally do." (Board 7, Interview 40)

On the contrary, board members who felt no tension and assumed the board was cohesive but were struck by tension during the board meeting had to decide "on the spot" how to respond. Additionally, board members who did not experience tension shared more general theories on how they should respond to tension and conflict than those who experienced tension. These findings are in line with what Argyris (1992) calls espoused theories. Espoused theories describe the general reasons individuals give for their actions, and by expressing these reasons, they also suggest they would indeed behave accordingly "in action" when faced with conflict. Implicit, taken-for-granted theories (Boivie et al., 2021; Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Levy et al., 1998), in contrast, also referred to as "schema" and "values" (Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Perlow & Repenning, 2009;

TABLE 3 Example statements of conflict management theories

Example statements of implicit conflict management theories

- "If I call the chair between meetings to ask him a question or a concern, he might think I have or see a serious problem, and that could enact a dynamic that I do not intend, so I better not call him." (Board 5, Interview 28)
- "I have discussed this matter with the chair; he disagreed, so now, if I address this issue with other nonexecutives, it will feel like I am going against his leadership." (Board 12, Interview 75)
- "I am conscious of how and who is present in how I express my opinion. You do not want to risk hurting one's feelings." (Board 5, Interview 29)
- "I discuss concerns and issues with the chair. I consider him my mentor." (Board 5, Interview 28)
- "Some board members want to have a premeeting previous to the general meeting with the CEO, but I do not like this because it will create distrust with the CEO." (Board 12, Interview 76)
- "I am not the financial expert, so I entrust these types of decisions to the audit committee." (Board 16, Interview 105)
- "I often make notes to remind myself of real-time experiences and observations that were not in line with what I expect so I can share those when we discuss our collaboration." (Board 7, Interview 40)"The chair and a nonexecutive and I discussed my performance. The others gave their input. As the two nonexecutives gave mixed messages, I do not whether how they really appreciate me." (Board 3, Interview 16)
- "We are required to have an external self-evaluation of the supervisory board once every 3 years." (Board 3, Interview 13)
- "He thought it was really exaggerated. So, then I thought, I'll let it go." (Board 1, Interview 5)
- "I am the expert concerning sustainability, so I feel responsible for making sure the topic is on the agenda." (Board 14, Interview 85)
- "I check in with all nonexecutives informally before the meeting and talk on a regular basis with the CEO, so I know what is going on." (Board 7, Interview 41)
- "We spoke afterwards in the parking lot."
- "I immediately called the chair after the meeting" (Board 3, Interview 14)
- "I did not tell them, no. I was taken by surprise, and I guess felt criticized." (Board 8, Interview 52)
- "We try new ways to work together and resolve issues in time. For one, we always evaluate the board meeting." (Board 13, Interview 82)"We have tried to change his behavior, and he does not listen; so now we are just waiting until he leaves the board." (Board 16, Interview 103)"We do not have to agree, but we agree that we need to discuss what to do when we disagree." (Board 9, Interview 56)

Postmes et al., 2001), "scripts" (Kuhn & Poole, 2000) or "action theories" (Argyris, 1992), are theories that explain how people in fact respond when faced with conflict. Espoused theories can differ from action theories when board members assume they, for example, are open and transparent, but when faced with a dilemma or tension, they realize only when asked to reflect on it that they are not always open. Accordingly, our data highlighted many inconsistencies between board members' conflict management theories and even inconsistencies expressed by a board member in the interview. From our data, we inferred that when board members are unaware of their implicit conflict management theories, the level of sharedness of these

theories may vary unknowingly but significantly. See Table 4 for example statements and observation of inconsistencies.

4.2.2 | Perceived power difference

Analyzing board members' conflict management theories showed that primarily actual and perceived power differences between nonexecutives on the one hand and between nonexecutives and CEOs on the other hand shape individual board members' conflict management theories.

TABLE 4 Inconsistent implicit conflict theories

Inconsistent implicit conflict management theories	Examples
Misalignment between individual espoused conflict management theories and conflict management action theories	<p>“Although I always thought that I say all what I think, I was not aware of what I had been thinking during the meeting previous to this research, but now I realize I do not express all I think.” (Board 5, Interview 29)</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“It is so important to have different expertise in one board”</p> <p>However, later in the interview: “We disagree with him, so we decided to ignore him until his term expires.” (Board 16, Interview 104)</p>
Misalignment between action theories between board members	<p>The chair: “I always ask if everyone has been able to say what they think and feel. I consider this my responsibility.” (Board 7, Interview 41)</p> <p>Nonexecutive on the same board: “The chair makes jokes, and it annoys us, and we struggle with how we should tell him.” (Board 7, Interview 45)</p> <p>CEO: “I was frustrated because the chair promised me enough time to present my topic properly but silenced my anger because like we already discussed, I do not trust the nonexecutives.” (Board 3, Interview 16)</p> <p>Chair: “Our board is performing well. We have a very good team and do not avoid conflict.”</p> <p>From the observations of the boardroom meeting and the tape recordings, the first author observed that nonexecutives had to leave while the CEO was still presenting and discussing this strategic issue, but the tension that was palpable was not discussed. (Board 3, Interview 13)</p>

I have a serious issue with one of our nonexecutives. She is also the CEO of a big organization, has a huge network, and I view her as highly political. I am convinced she wants to take over the role of chair as he is leaving, and I am really concerned it will change the whole dynamic of this group. I am very conscious of the fact that she thinks I am not really important, and I even think other nonexecutives think alike. My profile is rather unusual. (Nonexecutive, Interview 33, Board 6)

Our data show that perceived power differences are highly ambiguous and situational in the boardroom. Since board members monitor the CEO and have the power to fire the CEO, the CEO feels dependent on the nonexecutives. However, as nonexecutives feel dependent on the CEO for information and the CEO has executive power since nonexecutives are not involved in implementation (Forbes & Milliken, 1999), they too feel hesitant to create tension and conflict with the CEO. Moreover, although the chair can be viewed “*primus inter pares*,” many board members perceive the chair as the leader, and especially when the chair is a seasoned executive or non-executive, the chair's informal and formal power is perceived as high. We hence suggest that conflict management theories are “constituted by and constitute the complex rendering of social relations such as membership, allowing different ways of selecting, presenting, interpreting and identifying ‘us’ and ‘them’ ” (Fan et al., 2020, p. 5).

These findings corroborate those of Roberts et al. (2005), which show how directors' expertise impacts their social status and conformity within the board. More specifically, we identified a protagonist and an antagonist for each board (Harvey, 2001). The antagonist pertains to the role that was primarily considered to have disturbed board cohesiveness by the protagonist, who “judged and accused” the antagonist for disturbing the cohesiveness. We found that antagonists and protagonists consist of both individuals and subgroups. Board members who were not involved directly in the conflict can be considered “overhearers” or “bystanders” (Messerli, 2017; Van Erp et al., 2015).

However, in this study, we consider each board member a protagonist or antagonist, as board members are individually accountable for decisions; hence, how they assess and respond to the situation is their responsibility. How they assess the situation and thus the majority or dominant opinion, shaped by formal and informal power differences, determines their response. We therefore labelled board members depending on the member's response to the perceived tension and with whom he or she resonates most. See Table 2 for how we assigned protagonists and antagonists per board. In line with Harvey (2001), we found that “dramaturgical interpretation” of the relationships shapes the tensions and conflicts between the board members that require resolution. Scholars concerned with the presentation of the self, either in everyday life or more specific situations, have noted the inherent dialectics, paradoxes, dilemmas, and tensions in these relational processes (Argyris, 1992; Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Hacking, 2004; Harvey, 2001; Hunt & Benford, 1994; Jensen, 2001; Pronin et al., 2004). These dramaturgical interpretations are shaped

by not only formal roles and duties but also perceived informal power structures. These informal power structures were also enacted during board meetings.

The question addressed to the first author: “Did you see us make eye contact? I knew he (other nonexecutive) knew exactly what I was thinking when she again raised her point.” (Nonexecutive, Interview 6, Board 1)

4.3 | Board's dominant conflict management style

From exploring what was said and board members' recollections of what was not said but felt during the meeting and why, seven theoretical categories emerged from our data: (a) complying, (b) silencing, (c) confidential gossiping, (d) voicing, (e) perspective-taking, (f) scheduling, and (g) changing composition. From these categories, the aggregated theoretical category “board's dominant conflict management style” emerged. Kuhn and Poole (2000) define conflict management styles as the strategies, action patterns or behaviors that are deployed to manage conflicts. Accordingly, these boards' dominant conflict management styles consist of action patterns that describe automated, routine responses enacted during and between board meetings and are shaped by the implicit conflict theories of individual board members. These implicit conflict management theories are enacted depending on how individual board members assess board cohesiveness and their own role and status. We refer to action patterns rather than behaviors because from our data, we found that a board member's response immediately activates a response with other board members. When a response is different than expected, it automatically also prompts other board members to respond differently depending on how they perceive cohesiveness. One response can thus change the perceived temperature and board cohesiveness and can immediately change the board's conflict norms and the responses of other board members. These changes can even happen in a few minutes. Hence, a board's climate is highly volatile.

4.3.1 | Complying

We named the first conflict management action pattern that emerged from our data “complying.” These action patterns correspond to implicit conflict theories that instruct board members to strictly comply with the agenda and to discuss only topics that are automatically allocated to one's role or expertise.

Since I am considered the financial expert, I feel a huge responsibility because we do not discuss our financial issues collectively and comprehensively. (Board 16, Interview 108)

This action pattern helps avoid disharmony because different perspectives, knowledge and skills that board members bring to the table,

although present, are not used (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). Compliance action patterns are hard to connect to conflict management styles identified by the literature (Ayoko & Konrad, 2012; De Dreu et al., 2001; Euwema et al., 2003). One could argue “compliance” is linked to “accommodating” when board members strictly adhere to the roles and rules, but it can also be linked to “compromising” because the roles and rules help find a middle ground when all board members focus on their own expertise. However, it could also be linked to “avoidance” as the roles and rules help prevent conflict when nobody meddles with someone else's role, expertise and perspective.

4.3.2 | Silencing

The second action pattern that emerged from our data involves consciously silencing thoughts and feelings or “withholding” due to the perceived risk of creating tension (Edmondson & Besieux, 2021).

For example: “I assessed that I would be the only one who disagreed. The way I see it, there is no point of disagreeing. It will only cost time and irritation, and I will not change the outcome of the decision.” (Non-executive, Interview 104, Board 16)

Board members' implicit conflict theories instruct board members to withhold their thoughts and feelings when they sense that speaking up could distort cohesiveness. When board members silence their thoughts and feelings, they do not use their knowledge and skills and the cognitive and process conflict that could enrich the board's decision-making (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). These findings are in line with those of Veltrop et al. (2020) and Westphal and Bednar (2005) that board members also do not always feel safe speaking up and with the theories of Morrison and Milliken (2000) and Perlow and Repenning (2009) concerning silencing in organizations. These findings are also related to studies that explore implicit voice theories (Detert & Edmondson, 2011) and that detail the antecedents of when individuals in organizations speak up. This action pattern is also hard to link to the extant conflict management literature. It could be linked to both “avoiding” and “accommodating” when tension is avoided through silencing. When board members do not express their opinion, they “accommodate” other board members' perspectives.

4.3.3 | Confidential gossiping

The third action pattern that we identify is “confidential gossiping.” It involves a minimum of two board members and can be considered a form of emergent story (Boje, 1991; Brown et al., 2009). Gossip and confidential gossip in organizations play a role in maintaining relationships within and between individuals and teams. Expectations and formal and informal protocols influence who gossips to whom and about what subject (Nicholson, 2001). This action pattern also relates to

silencing but is enacted by implicit conflict management theories that instruct board members to silence their concerns formally but share them informally with the chair or a board member they trust. Board members stated that they especially speak informally with peers about what had happened during the meeting when something unusual happened. When the CEO and the chair exchange information, they do not consider this exchange to be gossiping.

I often talk with the CEO. We share all kinds of information, including private information about the CEO's personal situation but also how we assess the situation in the boardroom, and what nonexecutives share with me when I talk to them personally. So we also discuss when a nonexecutive raises concerns, or we face other issues. (Chair, Interview 30, Board 5)

Thus, many board members assumed that sharing this information with peers was in line with what was expected from them. They view their informal conversation with the chair in accordance with the rules. Others view these informal conversations as necessary to make sense of the situation and find a resolution. These conversations enact higher levels of unsaid when the information exchanged is not shared with peers. Confidential gossiping often takes place in the parking lot or through WhatsApp when dealing with conflict.

Additionally, this pattern is hard to directly link to the five conflict management behaviors mentioned in the literature (Ayoko & Konrad, 2012). Confidential gossiping is on the one hand related to "avoiding," as it helps avoid having conflict formally. We posit, however, that when board members use these informal conversations to try to win the argument, such behavior is less related to "accommodating" and more related to "competing." However, when used for "perspective-taking" and understanding a peer, the intention behind the exchange of information is very different. Then, we would argue that this behavior is related to "collaborating." Additionally, it can be viewed as related to "collaborating" when board members assume the chair is responsible for managing conflict and through exchanging information, they collaborate with their chair and expect that sharing information will help resolve the tension.

4.3.4 | Voicing

The fourth conflict management action pattern that emerged from our data is somewhat similar to what the extant literature considers "competing," but it is also related to "accommodating" or to "avoidance," depending on how others respond. With voicing, we mean that board members decide to speak up even when they assume that they risk causing affective conflict and disturbing board cohesiveness. Voicing does not always happen deliberately. In Board 5, for example, we found that when one board member voiced her concern, others did too, which resulted unexpectedly in a heated debate. Our data show that implicit conflict theories instruct board members to

voice their concern when they sense raising their concern is their judicial responsibility.

For example: On a different board, I decided to speak up even though I knew they would not like me for it, and it would cause serious tension. Ultimately, I decided to leave the board due to the unresolved conflict and the stress that it caused me. What troubled me maybe most was when I left this board the external authority did not interview me about the reasons why I left. I did not, however, express the reasons formally myself because I am conscious that other boards could consider me a whistle blower. This could harm my prospects as a nonexecutive." (Nonexecutive, Interview 11, Board 2)

Hence, although board members might choose to voice their concern on their own board and risk being ostracized, they might silence their concerns to outsiders as they fear being ostracized by other boards as well.

4.3.5 | Perspective taking

The fifth conflict management action pattern we identified was labelled "perspective-taking" (Williams et al., 2007; Wu & Keysar, 2007). From observational statements made during the board meeting and in the interview, we noticed that boards in which perspective-taking was actively and openly stimulated or practised were able to maintain cohesiveness while at the same time appreciate different and even conflicting views (i.e., cognitive conflict or process conflict).

For example: "Since our self-evaluation, I understand where he comes from and although I still feel some uneasiness when he expresses his views, I appreciate his contribution a lot more." (Nonexecutive, Interview 47, Board 8)

We also noticed that on boards in which this action pattern was enacted, board members collectively and explicitly explored each other's but also stakeholders' perspectives.

For example: "We should be aware that how they perceive this issue is different from how we perceive it, and unfortunately, even if we are correct, 'perception is reality'." (Board 9, tape recording of the board meeting)

Our data also reveal that chairs who were able to take another's perspective and hence actively explore the different needs of different directors (nonexecutives and executives), even when going against their own perspective, were considered the best chairs.

For example: Nonexecutive: “Our chair’s term expires and that makes me nervous, as our current chair is very open-minded and challenges us to say what we think.” (Nonexecutive, Interview 34, Board 6)

Hence, it is imperative to distinguish between “perspective-taking” and “inferring” or “speculating.” When board members take another’s perspective but do not actively explore and test their inferences or speculations, the latter can induce more or different types of tension. In particular, chairs or CEOs who assume they know what others think and feel but do not actively test their inferences risk eliciting unproductive action patterns.

For example: “My colleague who is going to present our marketing policy is very nervous. I hope you will not give him a hard time.” (CEO, tape recording of board meeting, Board 14)

From reconstructing the meeting, we noticed that board members who wanted to challenge the manager withheld their opinion; hence, the cognitive conflict that was needed did not take place. Moreover, board members were irritated because the presentation took too long, but they did not intervene.

The presentation took too long, but I did not say anything because we were asked to treat him respectfully. (Nonexecutive, Interview 92, Board 14)

This result was contrary to what the CEO in the interview said that he intended with his request.

Although “collaborating” (Ayoko & Konrad, 2012) shows similarities to “perspective-taking,” we think that construct perspective-taking more specifically describes this specific conflict style.

4.3.6 | Conscious scheduling

We named the sixth conflict management action pattern “conscious and flexible scheduling.” This action pattern is enacted when board members’ conflict management theories instruct them to take sufficient time to explore tensions and conflicts whenever they surface. Consequently, when faced with a full agenda that does not allow for comprehensively exploring a tension that unexpectedly surfaces due to limited time, these board members have conflict management theories that instruct them to schedule a new meeting. These board members explained in the interviews that they are conscious of the effect of time constraints on resolving conflicts effectively, know they cannot predict precisely when tension surfaces and express that they think it is important to schedule a new meeting when faced with unexpected tension. These board members moreover said they consciously design meetings and explained they are aware of the effects of the presence of specific roles on the meeting due to competing

stakes and said that they thus consciously and collectively decide who should be present during which meeting and why.

For example: “We need time with the nonexecutives to make sense together. That is why we always meet before our meeting without the CEO. We need time to discuss our concerns that could be about the CEO’s performance.” (Nonexecutive, Interview 54, Board 9)

Scheduling is not mentioned as a conflict management style in the extant conflict management literature but could be linked to “collaborating” (Ayoko & Konrad, 2012).

4.3.7 | Changing the board’s composition

We labelled the last and seventh conflict management action pattern that surfaced from our data “changing the board’s composition.” While exploring how boards manage the tension between cohesiveness and conflict, we noticed that in the interviews, board members regularly mentioned nonexecutives’ or executives’ tenure in relation to managing tension and conflict. Hence, we identified the conflict management action pattern “changing the composition of the board” enacted by conflict management theories that assume incumbent board members cannot resolve the tension and therefore someone should be replaced. Several board members mentioned changing the composition as the best solution to a conflict.

For example: “We are waiting until he leaves and can select a new board member.” (Chair, Interview 103 Board 16)

Another example: “I just do not fit in this board, as I have a different view on how to monitor the organization; so the chair and I decided that I would leave the board when my term expires and will not opt for a second term.” (Nonexecutive, Interview 94, Board 15)

On one board, the first author observed a meeting in which the chair used his tenure to solve a conflict during the meeting:

Almost shouting, the chair stated: “Considering how you continuously and incorrectly have framed this issue and implicitly have criticized my approach, I think it is best that I leave this board!!” (Tape recording of board meeting, Board 5)

We posit that this action pattern is linked to “avoidance” (Ayoko & Konrad, 2012) since when board members leave the board, they physically move away from the conflict issue (Euwema et al., 2003) and do not just mentally move away by silencing their thoughts and feelings.

While a change in board composition is used as a strategy to solve a conflict, we also noticed that selecting a new member can lead to tension and even conflict on the board. On two boards, the fact that a new chair should be selected due to the end of the current chair's term immediately raised tension (Boards 6 and 10). During one meeting, the topic of selecting the chair from among the sitting board members elicited so much tension that all board members mentioned the topic in the interview and shared their different views and concerns.

4.4 | Identifying board conflict climates

Building on the aggregated theoretical dimensions “board cohesiveness,” “the board's conflict norms formation,” and “the board's dominant conflict management style,” we identified four distinct board conflict climates (see Figure 2). We suggest that conflict climates result from and are shaped by the board's conflict norms formation, which continuously emerges from board cohesiveness. The board's conflict norms formation also continuously shapes conflict management action patterns. We consider boards that can effectively reconcile the perceived tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict as the most effective.

The four different board conflict climates that describe how boards manage the perceived tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness are (a) compliance climate, (b) pseudocohesive climate, (c) conflict climate, and (d) agree-to-disagree climate. We will describe each climate next (see Figure 2).

4.4.1 | Compliance climate

We suggest that boards with a compliance climate experience cohesiveness and have shared conflict norms (task commitment) but enact

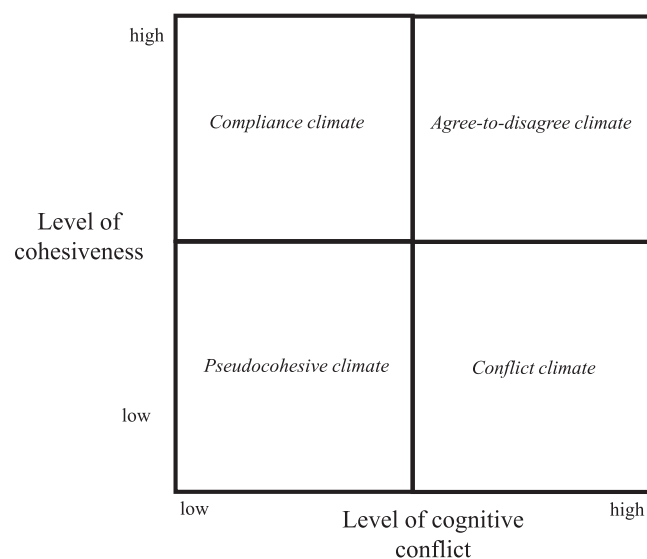


FIGURE 2 Four board conflict climates

unproductive action patterns involving silencing and confidential gossiping when faced with tension. See also Table 2: board numbers 15 and 17. Although members of these boards advocate using different perspectives, their dominant norm is to comply with informal rules and silence their knowledge when they think the topic on the agenda does not concern their role or expertise. Due to shared implicit conflict theories that instruct board members to strictly adhere to roles and rules, we posit that these boards experience high levels of cohesiveness (interpersonal attraction) but are unaware of how much is unsaid or consider what is unsaid irrelevant. In other words, they silence dissenting opinions because they automatically and silently concede with others' opinion when others are perceived to be better experts or more responsible and adhere strictly to the topic on the agenda. In case tension surfaces during the meeting, the chair is considered responsible for managing this tension privately and effectively after the meeting. Hence, cognitive conflict is immediately and effectively suppressed during the meeting.

Although what is said in conversations with the chair in between meetings is considered private and therefore can be viewed as confidential gossiping, all board members are aware that these conversations occur between the chair and other board members and thus do not consider them as such. This conflict management action pattern is taken for granted and is viewed as an integral part of how chairs and nonexecutives should perform. If the chair successfully manages emerging cognitive conflict privately and confidentially, we propose that these boards are able to avoid process and affective conflicts emerging in formal meetings and are able to maintain cohesiveness. When a board member and chair disagree and are not able to resolve a conflict, we posit that on these types of boards, the board member with the dissenting opinion concedes by not extending their term and by leaving the board willingly without disrupting board cohesiveness.

Although these boards have high levels of cohesiveness and an efficient way of resolving cognitive and process conflicts, we suggest that these boards perform suboptimally; despite the presence of cognitive conflicts required for high-quality decision-making, these conflicts and thus the available knowledge and skills are not used for high-quality decision-making (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). In addition, as our data showed, since the members of these boards think that they comply with general governance norms, they do not question their ways of working and even perceive themselves as professional. We propose that these boards are characterized by not only an absence of cognitive conflict (i.e., conflicts concerning investments, mergers and acquisitions) but also a lack of process conflict (i.e., how to govern and how to decide and resolve conflicts) and rely primarily on the chair's implicit conflict management theories when they experience tension. They use words and terms such as “of course,” “naturally” and “we should.” While the board as a collective is unaware of what is said during informal conversations with the chair, members risk developing different and misaligned assessments of their joint situation but still perceive their situation as “cool” and cohesive because they are unaware of the differences and their strategic meaning and rely on the chair's leadership when faced with tension.

4.4.2 | Pseudocohesive climate

We suggest that boards with a pseudocohesive climate manage the perceived tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness through unshared, misaligned ideas concerning the perceived board temperature and consequently misaligned conflict management norms (lack of task commitment).

We suggest that boards with this type of climate experience many silently perceived conflicts (see also Table 2, board numbers 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 16), (lack of interpersonal attraction) but as they remain silent, board members can act as if the board is cohesive. We posit that these boards have low levels of perceived cohesiveness and low levels of cognitive conflict.

For example, nonexecutives and 16 checked with the first author to determine if what they were sharing would remain confidential. The chairs of these same boards, however, told the first author that they assumed that all could be said formally and explicitly and asked the first author to share her findings without constraints.

Misalignment between board members shapes their climate more than their alignment. One board member might assume “all is well, but some things can be improved,” whereas other board members assess the situation as “tense, stressful and toxic” but do not express how they perceive the temperature because they assume it will cause a conflict. Unshared and inconsistent individual board members' conflict management theories of these boards also shape how board members perceive each other's responses and how they perceive board cohesiveness. A board member who experiences tension operates from implicit conflict theories that inform him or her to silence his or her opinion while acting as if all is well and to deal with a peer who experiences low levels of tension and operates from implicit conflict theories that instruct him or her to share opinions openly. This peer might not be aware that his or her opinion is perceived as dominant or even “toxic,” especially when the person who silences his or her opinion about his or her peer's responses acts as if he or she is appreciating the relation and collaboration.

Although not all members are aware that a conflict exists, we found that board members who are not involved in the conflict directly nonetheless often sense that something is awry. We noticed that board members of these boards have different expectations regarding the chair's responsibility concerning the conflict and often even experienced the chair's performance central to the conflict and hence could not discuss their concern with the chair directly. As the board performs cohesively, the chair is often not informed, and the conflict is not on the agenda. Thus, the agenda does not facilitate those who want to raise their concerns.

Depending on the protagonists and antagonist and the intensity and duration of the conflict, the unshared, inconsistent, and even conflicting conflict management theories of board members lead to unproductive action patterns. This unproductive conflict management

style consists primarily of silencing and confidential gossiping. Although some board members may voice their concern carefully or even more forcefully during formal meetings and some may try to comply with the rules, the dominant action pattern consists of silencing and confidential gossiping.

Additionally, even when individual members might want to respond to the situation by introducing new conflict management norms, they are not successful in developing and enacting a shared conflict norm.

For example, when one nonexecutive director suggests all nonexecutives should meet without the CEO present (Board 12, Interview 75) as it will help them express nonexecutives concerns' openly and will help them collectively decide what to do, the chair does not agree to meet without the CEO, these nonexecutives do not share conflict norms and the minority board member must concede to the others' perspectives.

When board members' implicit conflict theories instruct them to silence their observations during board meetings but to share their concerns and observations about their peer's behavior through confidential gossiping, they may unintentionally produce more conflict and tension. When more peers become aware of the perceived conflict and concurring tension, their own perceptions are amplified based on what they are told privately. Therefore, we suggest that through silencing and confidential gossiping, conflicts and tension increase when more board members become aware of the perceived tension and conflict, and frustrations grow as the conflict is not explored openly with the individual whom it concerns and is not properly addressed, that is, by the chair. We also suggest that when board members in these types of climates discuss issues informally, they underestimate the effects of informal conversations on cohesiveness, as it enacts information dispersion, speculation, and mistrust. They assume, on the contrary, that these confidential conversations do not shape decision-making in the boardroom. Based on our data, we propose that boards with a pseudocohesive climate experience a combination of silent cognitive, process and affective conflicts and difficulty regarding how to resolve or agree on these conflicts.

4.4.3 | Open conflict climate

We suggest that boards with an open conflict climate respond to perceived tensions between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness through unshared, inconsistent conflict management theories and unproductive action patterns that consist primarily of “voicing,” “changing the board's composition” and “silencing” (lack of task commitment). We also suggest that these boards perform suboptimally; despite openly engaging in the cognitive conflict required for high-quality decision-making, these boards experience high levels of process and affective conflict and thus lack cohesiveness and trust (boards 1, 5, and 10) (lack of interpersonal attraction). All board members who experienced

an open conflict climate shared different assessments in the interview concerning the conflict, the conflict's severity, and intensity, who is accountable and why. Sometimes, they even expressed that they did not fully comprehend what was being discussed. Indeed, open conflict and a lack of cohesiveness risk intensifying conflict and can even involve stakeholders when they become aware of the conflict, which further increases tension.

In addition, due to unshared inconsistent conflict management theories and responses, board members increasingly experience tension and multiple conflicts. Notions as to how the conflict can be resolved differ because board members' conflict management theories are shaped by the informal power, allocated roles and expertise of the antagonist and protagonist and the perceived board situation and high levels of unsaid. Consequently, board members do not know how to unravel the complexity that they face. We suggest that the conflicts in these types of climates are often old and, as such, have contaminated many topics instead of only one topic. These boards face multiple types of conflicts: conflicts about a specific topic, about how to reconcile the conflict and about whom and about who is accountable or to blame for enacting the conflict.

We propose, moreover, that although boards intensify the number of meetings and informal conversations when they are unable to reconcile conflicts effectively, they even risk increasing the conflict, as they lack the ability to effectively take perspective and share and explore what is unsaid. Additionally, because these board members are faced with multiple conflicts that they attempt to solve by talking about them formally, they are impeded by the agenda, which does not always seem aligned with the framing of the conflicts (Cornelissen et al., 2014). Our data also show that the board's agenda often mirrors what external authorities and stakeholders require of the board and what the board assumes should be discussed. However, when board members perceive temperature and cohesiveness differently, the agenda does not match all board members' perception of what should be discussed. Some board members are then required to fit their concerns into a topic and risk being misunderstood.

In addition, we found that even if a conflict is openly discussed, much remains silenced. Relational information about how board members perceive one another's performance, about emotions and frustrations and how they respect one another, and about who they perceive is accountable for the perceived temperature remain formally silenced but are shared informally through confidential gossiping. When tensions increase and more and more is voiced, consciously and in response to heated debate, even trust issues are sometimes openly shared. When affective conflict surfaces openly, such conflicts are difficult to manage (Edmondson & Smith, 2006). The only solution that remains to resolve the conflict then is changing the boards' composition.

4.4.4 | An agree-to-disagree climate

We posit that boards with an agree-to-disagree conflict climate respond to conflict through shared and consistent conflict

management theories and productive conflict management styles (task commitment). These productive action patterns involve "perspective-taking" and "conscious scheduling."

For example, on Board 9, board members regularly used words such as "perception." Even the CFO, while presenting, regularly used this word and made explicit when she made inferences and what was in fact measured.

Through their actions, board members show that they not only advocate for diversity, using various available perspectives (cognitive conflict), but they also appreciate and promote cognitive conflict "in action" (Argyris, 1992). Their dominant conflict norms and related action patterns assume actively stimulating cognitive conflict lowers the risk of eliciting affective conflicts. Board members with these conflict management theories are aware of how people with different backgrounds and different skills see and act differently but consider these differences valuable for decision-making purposes instead of an obstacle to reaching consensus. Therefore, we suggest that these types of boards actively stimulate and appreciate both process and cognitive conflicts but consciously disconnect them from affective conflicts (interpersonal attraction).

Shared implicit conflict theories that promote cognitive and process conflicts enact a dominant conflict management style that also helps create trust, limits what is silenced, and limits the need for confidential gossiping. We also posit that enacted productive action patterns further increase cohesiveness. When board members experience that they are able to reconcile conflicts respectfully and effectively, board members learn they can trust each other when they experience tension and disagreement. This trust then helps them voice their dissenting perspective, so through perspective-taking, and in case of insufficient time, through rescheduling, others will also feel encouraged to share their views. Additionally, when they agree, they continue to disagree, and after having comprehensively explored different views and arguments, board members explained to the first author that they ensured they asked the minority voice how they could accommodate him or her. Consequently, we suggest that these boards perform optimally; the two-criteria cognitive conflict required for high-quality decision-making and cohesiveness are maintained by shared, agree-to-disagree norms and related action patterns.

We encountered only one board with an agree-to-disagree climate. Compared to the members of other boards, the members of this board had aligned narratives about their history, their current situation and how they manage the issues on which board members disagree. We also found that board members referred to their history to explain why and how they were able to develop their conflict reconciliation theories. Due to an experienced, serious open conflict that had emerged in the previous board a couple of years prior, the current nonexecutives were selected by shareholders to resolve the organization's urgent and challenging situation.

We were selected because they assumed we were able to tackle the many issues this organization was facing.

We had to collaborate intensely, as we needed to select and hire a new CEO and at the same time manage the organization. We really got to know each other well and how we differed and what was important to us. Through our collaboration and challenging situation, we developed trust, and I guess how we work today is shaped by what we built then. (Non-executive, Interview 54, Board 9)

None of the board members had mentioned a specific moment that the first author had observed and that she considered relevant or assumed would be perceived relevant in other climates. One nonexecutive offered feedback to the CEO in the formal meeting even when all nonexecutives, executives and the secretary were present. He put his hand on the CEO's back, implicitly saying "I respect you" while mentioning a concern about the CEO's behavior. The CEO nodded and silently acknowledged the feedback. The fact that neither the CEO nor the nonexecutives mentioned this moment in the interview suggests that it was normal that the nonexecutive offered feedback during the regular meeting. The first author assumed that this "open" process conflict could easily have triggered affective conflict, considering what she had observed on other boards.

Thus, we propose that in agree-to-disagree climates, little remains silenced, the levels of unsaid are low, and little is discussed in confidential conversations. When conversations take place informally, others are aware that these conversations have occurred and are informed about what has been discussed. Although members of these boards might disagree, they share assessments on the board's performance, the performance of individual board members and disagreements between board members and have norms on how to reconcile these conflicts.

5 | DISCUSSION

Despite the considerable interest in opening the black box of board decision-making (Bailey & Peck, 2011; Boivie et al., 2016; Finkelstein & Mooney, 2003; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Veltrop et al., 2020; Westphal & Bednar, 2005), how boards manage the tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict, the two key criteria that shape board performance (Forbes & Milliken, 1999), has received little attention. How boards deal with this fascinating tension was the question at the center of this study. These insights have three important implications for board research. First, contrary to Forbes and Milliken's (1999) suggestion that effective boards should promote cognitive conflict, our data reveal that 16 out of 17 boards avoid cognitive conflict, as they assumed voicing their opinion would automatically elicit affective conflict and diminish the board's cohesiveness. Since board members assume raising concerns about a topic could be viewed criticism of the board member's performance who is responsible for the task and would lead to affective conflict, they choose to withhold their opinions, stick to discussing topics that concern their own responsibilities or try to solve the issue through confidential

gossiping with peers to maintain cohesiveness. When they do voice their opinion, they want others to concede to their opinion, which results in open conflict that hampers cohesiveness. A change in board composition is then considered a quick and the only effective way to resolve the tension.

While board members do not timely share how they perceive their board's temperature, board members unknowingly have different ideas on how their board is performing (i.e., if the board experiences tension) and may have different ideas on board cohesiveness. Especially when board members silently consider not extending their term or leaving the board early, the perceived cohesiveness may differ among board members. Our study thus suggests that although boards avoid conflict, they are nonetheless mostly not cohesive. Especially when board members silently experience process conflict, which automatically elicits (silenced) speculations about a peer's motives, which enacts affective conflict, a higher perceived board temperature lowers the board's cohesiveness when board members start reflecting on (someone) leaving the board. These findings confirm the idea that boards face serious decision-making barriers due to the challenging conditions they work in (Boivie et al., 2016; Veltrop et al., 2020; Westphal & Bednar, 2005) and that the rules and codes do not help boards develop explicit conflict norms that help overcome this essential tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict. Thus, most boards perform suboptimally, as the knowledge and skills that are indeed available are not used (Forbes & Milliken, 1999).

Moreover, our findings invite further research concerning the misalignment and incorrectness of implicit conflict theories. While board members clearly allocate roles (chair, vice chair, committee chair) and expertise (finance, HR, legal) and agree on how often they should meet and when, and in addition "espouse" (Argyris, 1992) promoting cognitive conflict, this research shows that board members unknowingly develop misaligned assessments about their situation, about each other's performance and, if perceived in action (Argyris, 1992), how to resolve tensions and conflicts. When they face tension, they struggle with cognitive and process conflict and often especially when tension is emerging, unknowingly suppress different opinions and views. Although they assume they have aligned ideas on how to collaborate and espouse diverse opinions, they unknowingly have different ideas about their situation, about how well they collaborate and who is responsible for tensions. Their ideas concerning what governance requires are not aligned (Boivie et al., 2021). These implicit differences enact a serious mix of cognitive process and affective conflict (Bailey & Peck, 2011; Kerwin et al., 2011) when board members do not "take-perspective" (Williams et al., 2007; Wu & Keysar, 2007), do not inquire into the logic of others, and do not explore their own bias. These findings hence corroborate the relevance and risk of naïve realist bias (Pronin et al., 2004), false attribution (Ross, 2018) and false consensus bias (Ross et al., 1977) and defensive routines (Argyris, 1992).

In particular, our findings suggest that future research should focus more on the influence of implicit and taken-for-granted governance rules and codes on decision making. Many horizontal and vertical faultlines (Thatcher & Patel, 2012) are established through role

assignment, committees, and other criteria to which boards—in their limited time—need to comply to follow through on their commitment. These rules and faultlines can hinder decision-making processes when information is not shared due to lack of time, lack of perceived relevance, or perceived risks due to perceived formal and informal hierarchical differences among executives and among nonexecutives (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Veltrop et al., 2017). Specifically, our study suggests that scholars could focus more on the effects of non-executives' part-time involvement, the associated lack of time on the quality of decision-making, the perceived power difference (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2021) and other “design” barriers that impede decision-making (Boivie et al., 2016).

Second, our data reveal that boards have distinct conflict management styles that shape specific board climates. We even distinguished seven action patterns that differ from the five conflict handling modes delineated in the extant literature (Euwema et al., 2003; Klaas et al., 2012) and that shape four distinct board climates. As we were able to explore what people said formally but also what they thought privately or shared informally, we identified action patterns that cannot be identified by only observing boardroom decision-making or that will not easily surface in surveys in which people are asked for their “espoused theories” rather than their “action theories” (Argyris, 1992). Exploring action patterns that are enacted below consciousness requires reflecting on a specific situation and “prompting” board members to reflect on why they responded in the way they did (Ross, 1989).

Especially since board members operate under extreme circumstances with high power figures and high stakes, we suggest that future research should focus more on “unusual suspects” such as defensive routines (Argyris, 2011), confidential gossiping (Fan et al., 2020), informal conversations, power dynamics, politics, and silence (Morrison, 2014) since these aspects may shape and explain more of what happens in the boardroom (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2021) than “the usual suspects” (Finkelstein & Mooney, 2003). These findings underscore the need to explore deep-level attributes (i.e., underlying attributes, such as attitudes, values, and beliefs) and the preconscious (Javel, 1999) and subconscious processes that trigger fears, uncertainty, emotions and other biological and physiological processes.

Moreover, our inductive study from which climate as a construct surfaced suggests that climates are best measured by assessing how individuals perceive the organization (James et al., 2008) rather than through objective features of organizations (Glick, 1985). Our study also suggests that climate corresponds to not only the consensus among individuals in their perceptions that is aggregated to represent a unit or organizational climate (James et al., 2008) but also that the level and type of disagreement represents a unit or organizational climate. Moreover, since our study concerns nonexecutive and executive board members in an inverted power structure, it confirms that the constructs of leadership and climate should be treated separately, and the theories, action patterns of these leaders and the conflict norms formation that emerge from these leaders should be viewed as triggers or antecedents of climate (Schneider et al., 2013).

Third, the paper develops new insights concerning how boards can manage the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness. Our study suggests that “board reflexivity” (Pieterse et al., 2011) and shared conflict norms (Perlow & Repenning, 2009) can counteract the negative effects of cognitive conflict on affective conflict and cohesiveness. It also confirms and emphasizes the importance of mitigating the risk of naïve realist bias (Pronin et al., 2004; Ross & Ward, 1996), false attribution bias (Ross, 2018), false consensus bias (Ross et al., 1977) and defensive routines (Argyris, 1992) on decision-making through conscious and explicit “perspective-taking” and “conscious scheduling.” These two action patterns enable the exploration and resolution of cognitive conflict in time before it escalates into a serious process and affective conflict.

Moreover, our study highlights the importance of explicit and shared conflict management norms that elicit productive CMSs. Although this finding may sound logical, our research suggests the opposite. When board members are unaware of their conflict management theories and are unaware of how others perceive them and their performance (Goffman, 1982; Harvey, 2001; Pronin et al., 2004), discussing perceived inconsistencies can generate tension and conflict. Hence, the suggested solution enacts the tension that people indeed try to avoid. Especially when individuals experience power differences and engage in in-group bias/out-group discrimination (Brewer & Silver, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1982), it is not easy to speak up and challenge the status quo (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Edmondson & Besieux, 2021). Among potential research questions, scholars could focus on if, and if so, how boards align ideas on governance and how to work and decide together (Pieterse et al., 2011) when faced with conflict.

6 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research has several limitations that can serve as a starting point for future research.

First, we investigated boards in a similar institutional environment (i.e., the Netherlands), and we only explored one board model (i.e., two-tier boards). Additionally, 15 out of 17 boards were from housing corporations; thus, board climates may very well differ for other corporate governance configurations (Misangyi & Acharya, 2014) and cultures. Considering the fact that Dutch culture is perceived as rather open, we do not know how much is not said on boards consisting of other nationalities (Hofstede, 1995).

As we welcomed each board that was willing to participate, we did not purposefully sample boards; hence, we also do not know the effects of this sample of boards on our findings. Did these boards feel safe to participate as they assumed that all was said, or did they participate as they hoped the study would help them reveal what was not said? Alternatively, did they participate for political reasons, hoping the results would help them achieve their goals (Alvesson, 2003)?

Second, although we did not a priori adopt a specific concept, we did choose to explore what board members said as well as what they

felt and thought but did not say during the board meeting, as we assumed that board members cannot say all they think since boards are relatively large and need to discuss many topics in relatively limited time. Adopting this perspective elicits many onto-epistemological issues involving how to handle data derived confidentially, as it impedes triangulation (Carter et al., 2014; Fusch et al., 2018; Jick, 1979). However, it also questions the validity of memories and reflections that are elicited by prompting board members as we did. Additionally, due to our approach, we became increasingly aware of the highly subjective way people assess their situation and how much is not shared and not known by all board members. What is true, what is real, and what is speculative, and how much is enacted by the research process itself? Therefore, we emphasize that this study should be considered a subjective account (Cunliffe, 2011) merely aimed at exploring a mystery and hence (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) not aimed at testing a hypothesis (Edmondson & McManus, 2007) and suggesting that the findings are valid and completely true. However, although subjective, we also think that we came close to exploring the board's lived experience, especially since we also explored if our categories and our conceptual model resonated (McDonnell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010) with 120 board members.

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper explores how 17 two-tier Dutch boards manage the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness. Although both cognitive conflict and cohesiveness are prerequisites for supervisory boards to fulfill their governance and monitoring roles, our study shows that cognitive conflict may create such tension that it actually affects board cohesiveness, which may subsequently impinge upon effective decision making (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). Our data indeed suggest that boards struggle with managing the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness and reveal that how boards manage this tension is shaped by their conflict climate. We identified four distinct but temporal climates. The conflict climate is continuously shaped by board cohesiveness, the board's conflict norms formation and the board's dominant conflict management style.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There is no funding and conflicts of interest to report for this submission. All the research meets the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements of the studied country.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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