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**Communication Dimensions of Supervisor-subordinate Conflict:
Perceptions by Subordinates of Sex/Gender Differences in
Supervisors' Conflict Strategies**

Maria del Pilar Montoya

My personal interest about conflict in the workplace and its relation with sex/gender started early in my first years as a communication practitioner, and later became a topic for my academic research. After I did not find satisfactory answers among the popular beliefs and perceptions to the inquiries about conflict in the workplace, I turned my search to what the social sciences have investigated. I have to recognize that at the beginning my internal explanations about the reasons why conflict with supervisors happened were biased on traumatic conflict experiences with female supervisors as a participant and an observer, in which I perceived unfair treatment and abuse of power.

Nevertheless, the deeper I went in my research not only about conflict but also about sex and gender in the workplace, I opened my mind to the stream of explanations and analysis about this inexhaustible phenomenon of human nature. Therefore, after a previous qualitative study about stories of conflict with female supervisors, its most representative features and effects in subordinates, I am looking for more answers, but using a quantitative approach to inquire if men and women differently perceive how their bosses communicate in conflict and how these leaders are rated by these subordinates.

This study does not attempt to be conclusive or ignore previous research. Instead of assuming the findings are unquestionable, the challenge is to contribute to the scholarly dialogue and encourage academic discussion from a scientific perspective and



provide additional insights about conflict as one of the components of the complexity of human interaction.

This paper has the following sections: literature review, method, results, discussion, conclusions, limitations, and final thoughts.

Literature Review

Approaching Conflict

Theorists have conceptualized the concept of conflict from different approaches regarding what conflict implies and how it should be managed (Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Miller, 2009). According to Kolb and Putnam (1992), the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s constituted new stages for the development of conflict research. These authors observed that during the 1960s, research focused on conflict among divisions, groups, and members in different levels of the hierarchical structure. Also, they described how conflict turned from being conceived as a situation that undermined the organization into being conceived as a process that could achieve positive outcomes. Kolb and Putnam also pointed out how during the 1980s and 1990s, conflicts moved from been managed in the public sphere as “dramatic confrontations” which required the intervention of a third party, to being resolved in a more private sphere as part of organizational “routine and mundane activities” (pp. 311-312).

In addition to Kolb and Putnam, Miller (2009) also provided a significant contribution to the analysis of conflict theories’ evolution. Miller summarized this theoretical framework in six approaches (p. 175): (1) classical, where a “breakdown” in flows of communication affect efficiency, (2) human relations, which conceive conflict



as a situation against “harmonious work relations,” (3) human resources, which look at conflict in a positive way promoting cooperation among conflict’s participants to achieve win-win solutions, (4) systems, where conflict includes dynamic and cyclical events and is affected by interdependent communication in relationships, (5) cultural, where organizational symbols and values reflect conflict, and (6) critical, which analyzes the forces and consequences that are behind organizational “power dominance.”

Narrowing the previous broad description about how scholars have approached organizational conflict, it is important to the purpose of this study to go deeper in the discussion. In 1982, Linda L. Putnam and Charmaine E. Wilson, communication scholars, engaged in challenging the conflict research that was developed at that time (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). Putnam and Wilson (1982) argued that researchers had not paid enough attention to the role of communication in conflict, as well as to the reliability and validity of the instruments used in other conflict research. In addition, these authors did not agree with the assumption that a person always has a particular conflict management style. They alleged how he or she behaves constitutes a choice that might basically depend on situational factors. Putnam and Wilson also questioned that some research was focused on finding the “source or target of conflict” (p. 632) as well as based on imprecise definitions of conflict such as “opposing actions of individuals” (p. 632). All of the problems described above encouraged Putnam and Wilson to create the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) that is tested in this research.



Derived from the conceptual framework previously described, three aspects are fundamental for this research: (1) understanding the communicational dimension of conflict in the workplace (verbal and nonverbal behaviors), (2) using an instrument with recognized reliability and validity, and (3) adopting a definition of conflict that explores negative and positive features of conflict.

After the overview of theoretical framework of conflict research, it is relevant to overview the conflict definitions which point at how conflict is operationalized in this study. In the review of literature, a variety of definitions were found that illustrated the human resources resource perspective. This approach conceives conflict as an opportunity to achieve positive outcomes.

For example, consistent with studies from the human resources perspective, Van Slyke's (1999) definition explained conflict as "the competition between interdependent parties who perceive that they have incompatible needs, goals, desires, or ideas" (p. 5), but these parties are encouraged to find communication, the path for constructive resolution, beneficial to both parties. Similarly, highlighting the advantages of conflict, Littlejohn and Domenici (2007) stated that "Conflict exists when people experience their differences as a problem that needs special action" (p. 4); a conflict situation leads to a critical self analysis of ideas, encourages creativity, teaches about emotions, people and community, and leads to effective conflict resolution (pp. 5-6).

These studies reflect in some way the conflict definitions that Putnam and Wilson (1982) adopted more than 25 years ago when they designed the OCCI. These scholars assumed conflict as a situation from which, even with the incompatibilities and



disagreements, the parties can obtain positive outcomes, but this situation has to be adequately managed in order to avoid hurtful consequences.

Similar to Van Slyke (1999), Littlejohn and Domenici (2007), and Putnam and Wilson (1982), this study will adopt a human resources approach in analyzing subordinates' perceptions of supervisors' communicative behaviors in conflict. This study recognizes the problematic situations that cause and characterize conflict situations (disagreements and incompatibilities), but at the same time, values conflict as an positive experience that, if it is faced constructively and collaboratively, would achieve not only personal but also collective improvements.

Research about conflict between supervisors and subordinates needs to be improved. Miller (2009) observed that organizational conflict research has been mostly focused on the "interpersonal level of conflict, the level at which individual members of the organization perceive goal incompatibility" (p. 161). However, Xin and Pelled (2003) argued that scholars have been focused on types of conflicts, such as "task and emotional conflict" (pp. 25-26) without paying enough attention to interpersonal conflict between people of different organizational levels, specifically how subordinates perceive supervisor's behavior. In developing this area, Xin and Pelled studied how emotional and task conflicts are associated with subordinates' perception of leadership behavior. Their findings revealed that in emotional conflict, subordinates more negatively evaluate their supervisors' leadership abilities than when a mixed conflict (conflict which involves emotional and task disagreements) occurs. Specifically, a mixed conflict does not significantly affect subordinates' perceptions of their supervisors as leaders who "offer



emotional support and encourage creativity” (p. 36). No distinction between perceptions of male and female subordinates was investigated.

Based on the gap of conflict research explained above, this study attempts to develop scholarship regarding conflict in vertical dyads from the subordinates’ point of view. However, in the case of this research, the focus in interpersonal conflict shifts from measuring task and emotional conflict to the communicational dimension of conflict with supervisors perceived by subordinates.

Therefore, along with the human resources approach, this study will also take a critical organizational studies perspective. The critical perspective does not mean the researcher strictly follow a critical methodology; it means taking into account some of the critical approach’s features described by Miller (2009): viewing perception of conflict as a potential indicator of unfair management of power, evidenced for example, in discrimination because of organizational beliefs about sex and gender. In addition, the critical perspective recognizes not only that “Power affects the choices people make when they respond to conflict” (Collins, 2005, p. 37), but also that still in modern organizations, people accept control from managerial levels without significant resistance or attempt of participation (Deetz, 1995, p. 37). A critical analysis goes beyond simply descriptions of conflict and discusses the forces behind people’s perceptions, such as sex and gender differences, as they relate to supervisor-subordinates relationships.

Gender and Sex Differences in Organizations

This research inquires about the extent to which subordinates’ biological sex affects their perception about supervisor performance in conflict situations. In analyzing



these perceptions, the research takes into account Kolb and Putnam's (1992) caution, borrowed from other scholars, about how conflict is affected by the context in which it is found (p. 312).

Recognizing that conflict does not constitute an isolated phenomenon drives the attention to issues such as the differences between the concepts of sex and gender. Powell and Graves (2003) distinguished "sex" as the biological characteristics (body) with which a person was born while "gender" derives from people's expectations about individuals' behaviors in their social interaction, according to these individuals' biological sex. In explaining the differences, Powell and Graves offer a comprehensive description:

The study of sex differences examines how males and females actually differ. In contrast, the study of gender differences focuses on how people believe that males and females differ. For example, a sex difference in leadership style would exist if female leaders were more considerate of their subordinates than were male leaders. There would be a gender difference in leadership style if people believed that female leaders were more considerate of their subordinates. (p. 4)

Therefore, considering the roles that sex/gender concepts play in socialization processes among organizational members, the interpretation of the conflict strategies measurement should be addressed under the perspective that what people perceive is a gendered expectation.

Regarding gender differences (what people perceive), Powell and Graves (2003) pointed out that "stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination" (p. 4) characterize people's



perceptions. In fact, scholars call attention to the unfair treatment that women have experienced in the workplace (Bartol, 1980; DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; Marini, 1990; Powell & Graves, 2003; Schieman & McMullen, 2008; Voelck, 2003).

On the other hand, research has demonstrated gender-based differences in management styles. For example, Voelck (2003) reported in her research about management styles of academic library managers, how respondents identified male managers as more “directive, and female [managers as] more collaborative” (p. 410). In detail, females describe their female supervisors as helpful, flexible, and friendly and easy to talk to (p. 409) while male supervisors were described as more interested in holding power and achieving success (p. 408). In a similar positive way, males perceive their female supervisors as balanced to manage power as well as good listeners, and people-oriented (p. 408). Males commented that their male supervisors were over-directive (p. 408). In conclusion, this research indicates, according to subordinates’ perceptions, how male and female supervisors differently deal with organizational matters. However, these findings also show that male and female respondents report similar perceptions of their bosses’ performance; therefore, biological sex of subordinates did not affect how they evaluate their supervisors.

Along with perceived gender differences found by Voelck (2003), Schieman and Reid (2005) researched how holding authority could affect the likelihood of having interpersonal conflict in the workplace and the effects of variables such as gender and age on this conflict (p. 296). Among other findings, this research reported that authority has a positive association with conflict, so power holders are more likely to have conflict in the



workplace (p. 314). In this regard, young men were found as having higher levels of conflict than females because of males' likelihood to be more competitive and their lack of experience to resolve constructively conflict (p. 315). Nevertheless, the researchers explained that young males have more conflicts partly because they frequently work in "noxious jobs" or jobs that can affect their psychological or physical health because of dirty and noisy environments (p. 315). On the contrary, these scholars claim that in opposition to Acker's arguments (1991, cited in Schieman & Reid, 2005) about gender in organizations, workers who behave in masculine ways are not always rewarded in the workplace; for this reason, young males who hold authority are evaluated as having higher levels of conflict than other leaders.

Other research reveals specifically female-on-female negative experiences in the workplace. In this regard, Mizrahi (2004) observed how scientific and popular sources often generalize the idea that working with females is more difficult than working for males, with women of either the same or different hierarchical level (p. 1589). However, Mizrahi found that women engage in negative behaviors, such as female-on-female harassment, trying to compensate the unbalanced structure of power and discrimination that have targeted them.

Recently, research conducted by Schieman and McMullen (2008) revealed the effects of supervisors in subordinates' health. The main finding evidences how females who work with female supervisors report more deteriorated health than the ones working for males. The female workers presented higher levels of distress and health problem than the male workers did. The researchers contextualized this result, discussing previous



research that support the fact that women leaders have to face disadvantages in male-dominated environments and how being a female supervisor challenges the traditional beliefs about males as the power holders.

Similarly to other research, the researcher found in a previous qualitative study how differently supervisors behave in conflict situations from a subordinates' perspective (Montoya, 2008). Most of the participants agreed that biological sex plays a determinant role in the way how supervisors engage in conflict. This study revealed three basic categories about what subordinates consider negative behaviors and attitudes in female supervisors: "dominant style, unfair criterion, and lack of self confidence" (p. 22). Male and female subordinates alike concluded that emotions rather than rational judgments defined female bosses' behaviors, and that female supervisors often put too much emphasis on things that were not so important.

Summarizing, considerable research has analyzed sex and gender differences in the workplace. Some scholars allege discrimination and disadvantages that undermine how women's performance is rated in the workplace. However, different research reveals negative perception about both male and female performance in the workplace, but the idea that working for women is tougher has been widely promoted.

At this point, complementary research is needed to contribute to the discussion about whether or not there are sex and gender-based differences in supervisors' performance. Exploring the communicative dimension of conflict, rather than only managerial styles or causes of conflict would provide important insights to portray this phenomenon.



Study Rationale

Based on the literature review, two arguments support the significance of this study:

- (1) The controversy about how men are more rewarded and positively perceived than women in the workplace shows contradictory findings. Therefore, even though women are seen as a target of discrimination, stereotypes and prejudice, research supports how men are also negatively rated in managerial performance. Explanatory research is needed to support the extent in which not males or females are differently perceived based on sex/gender.
- (2) Interpersonal conflict in vertical dyads specifically in topics related to male and female subordinates' perception of leadership behavior has not had enough development.

Based on these two arguments, the researcher attempts to answer the following research question:

RQ1: Are there differences between males and females in their perceptions about conflict with female and male supervisors?

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 67 undergraduate and graduate students of a Midwestern state public university in the United States. The survey was answered by 24 males and 43 females, in an age range of 22 to 61. The students who were asked to participate were either university undergraduate non-traditional students ($N = 892$) or graduate students of one of the humanities programs ($N = 48$). Non-traditional students



are described as undergraduate students with a minimum age of 25. They are classified as non-traditional, not only because their average age is higher than the average undergraduate students, but also because they present some differences in comparison with the majority of undergraduates, such as having children, not being enrolled as fulltime students, or pursuing a second bachelor's degree.

Both groups, non-traditional and graduate students, were chosen because they had a greater likelihood of having a variety of workplace experiences involving conflict with supervisors especially due to their age, educational level and partial enrollment as students. Both groups also were a convenience sample due to the facilities to contact them through two university members who allowed the researcher to send the survey to their respective student email databases.

The respondents were 63 Americans and 4 from countries outside of the United States. They reported conflict experiences with 36 male supervisors and 31 female supervisors. The survey did not ask for race or socio-economic class. Also, participants and supervisors' names, as well as companies' names were not required. Biological sex was the only demographic information required about the supervisor with whom participants had experienced conflict. The participants were informed that the gathered information was confidential.

Scale

To measure how differently male and female supervisors communicate in conflict situations, Form B of the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) was applied after having a small adaptation which consists of changing the use of first-



person to third-person to measure perceptions of communication conflict behavior (See Appendix). The Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) is a 7-point Likert scale that was developed by Putnam and Wilson in 1982 where respondents rate each item from one (1) that means “Always” to seven (7) that means “Never.” A lower score indicates a high level of the strategy being measured (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994)

Putnam and Wilson developed Form B of the instrument as an improvement of the previous Form A (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, p. 242), which measured “five conflict management styles” (Putnam & Wilson, 1982, p. 635). These five styles measured communicative dimensions borrowed from Blake and Mouton (1964, as cited in Putnam & Wilson, 1982, p. 635), but subsequent tests demonstrated that the five conflict management styles could be represented just by three factors. These three dimensions were revealed by a “factor analysis with a varimax rotation” (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994, p. 242):

- (1) Nonconfrontation: indirect strategies for handling a conflict; choices to avoid or withdraw from a disagreement; such communicative behaviors as silence, glossing over differences, and concealing ill feelings.
- (2) Solution-orientation: direct communication about the conflict; behaviors that aim to find a solution, to integrate the needs of both parties, and to give in or compromise on issues.



- (3) Control: direct communication about the disagreement; arguing persistently for one's position, taking control of the interaction, and advocating one's position. (Putnam & Wilson, 1982, p. 647)

Form B consists of 30 items, and Form C consists of four nonconfrontation items added to “minimize potential desirability of the nonconfrontation scales” (Putnam & Wilson, 1982, p. 639; see the original scale on page 637). However, Rubin, Palmgreen, and Sypher (1994) explained that Form B is more commonly used by researchers.

Rubin, Palmgreen, and Sypher (1994) highlight reliabilities of the OCCI reported as good, its focus on communication behaviors rather than conflict styles, and its wide use in several kinds of social science research as strengths of this instrument (p. 244).

Reliability

Putnam and Wilson (1982) reported a high internal reliability (Cronbach alpha) for the three conflict dimensions: nonconfrontation .93; solution-orientation, .88; and control .82. Also Waltman (1988, cited in Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994, p. 243) obtained alpha reliability from .70 to .93 (p. 243). The obtained reliability for this study is nonconfrontation .91; solution-orientation, .94; and control .91 which are considered excellent (Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2008, p. 195).

Validity

Putnam and Wilson (1982) claim that OCCI has “moderate construct validity, and strong predictive validity (p. 649). To test the construct validity, they conducted the OCCI with other two other conflict questionnaires to determine the positive correlation of the scale with similar instruments and the negative correlation with the dissimilar ones.



To test the predictive validity they carried out three studies that confirmed how OCCI can be used to predict communicative behavior of employees in “bureaucratic and systems conflicts” (p. 646).

Procedures

After creating a password-protected account in <http://www.surveymizmo.com>, the survey was created using the design tools provided by [this](#) web page where the survey was also hosted. The invitation to participate in this research was sent out to non-traditional student and graduate student email lists. The invitation included the link to access the survey: <http://www.surveymizmo.com/s/73073/conflictsupervisors>. One week after the first email, a follow-up email was sent out to the non-traditional students list. Needing more participation, by the time when the second email was sent to the non-traditional students list, an invitation was also sent to a graduate student email listserv. The survey was closed in the web page two weeks after it was launched.

A problem that the researcher faced on doing the survey by online administration was that the link did not work correctly in the pilot test for participants who opened the link from a different web browser than the one used to design the survey. In other words, the survey was designed using Firefox, but when someone tried to open the link using Internet Explorer, it did not allow the user to access the survey. Finally, the survey had to be designed running Internet Explorer, and later respondents using Firefox could answered it.

Data Analysis



After finishing the gathering data process, an Excel report was obtained from <http://www.surveymoz.com>. The web page reported 67 surveys completed and 57 abandoned. Later, the variables were created in SPSS and the Excel report put into this application. The questions were grouped in the three factors or strategies: “nonconfrontation” (questions 2, 5, 7, 12, 14, 15, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, and 29), “solution-orientation” (questions 1, 4, 8, 11, 19, 20, 6, 9, 13, 16, and 21), and “control (questions 3, 10, 17, 18, 22, 26, and 30). Reliability was run for the three conflict strategies as well as the factorial ANOVA. This statistical test was chosen because to find the differences between males and females in their perceptions about conflict with female and male supervisors, the researcher needed to analyze the main effects of the two nominal independent variables (subordinates’ biological sex and supervisors’ biological sex) with one dependent variable (level of conflict strategies) and the “interaction effect between the two independent variables” (Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2008, p. 415). In addition, by running only factorial ANOVA instead of running two separate one-way ANOVAs for each independent variable, the chance of Type I error was reduced (p. 414).

Results

A 2 x 2 factorial ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the differences between males and females in their perception about conflict with male and female supervisors. The 7-point Likert-type scale measured three conflict strategies. In relation with *nonconfrontation strategies*, the factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant main effect for biological sex on supervisors’ conflict *nonconfrontation* behaviors: ($F(1, 63) = .027$,



$p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .000$. Male supervisors presented a similar level of conflict *nonconfrontation* behaviors ($m = 4.28$, $sd = .83$) as female supervisors did ($m = 4.33$, $sd = 1.31$). The factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant main effect for participants' biological sex on supervisors' conflict *nonconfrontation* behaviors: ($F(1, 63) = .015$, $p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .000$. Male participants had similar perception about supervisors' *nonconfrontation* behaviors ($m = 4.32$, $sd = 1.01$) as female participants did ($m = 4.29$, $sd = 1.11$). Also, the factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant interaction effect for supervisors' biological sex with participants' sex on supervisors' *nonconfrontation* behaviors: ($F(1, 63) = 1.13$, $p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .018$.

In relation to *solution-orientation* strategies, the factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant main effect for supervisors' biological sex on supervisors' *solution-orientation* behaviors: ($F(1, 63) = .30$, $p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .005$. Male supervisors had a similar level of conflict *solution-orientation* behaviors ($m = 4.85$, $sd = .99$) as female supervisors did ($m = 4.96$, $sd = 1.06$). The factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant main effect for participants' biological sex on supervisors' conflict *solution-orientation* behaviors ($F(1, 63) = .015$, $p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .002$. Male participants had a similar perception about supervisors' conflict *solution-orientation* behaviors ($m = 4.78$, $sd = 1.05$) as female participants did ($m = 4.97$, $sd = 1.01$). Also, the factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant interaction effect for supervisors' biological sex with participants' biological sex on supervisors' conflict *solution-orientation* behaviors: ($F(1, 63) = .82$, $p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .013$.



In relation to *control strategies*, the factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant main effect for supervisors' biological sex on supervisors' conflict *control strategies* behaviors ($F(1, 63) = .77, p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .012$. Male supervisors had a similar level of conflict *control strategies* behaviors ($m = 3.37, sd = 1.15$) as female supervisors did ($m = 3.39, sd = 1.37$). However, the factorial ANOVA indicated a **significant** main effect for participants' biological sex on supervisors' conflict *control strategies* behaviors ($F(1, 63) = .435, p < .05$), $\eta^2 = .065$. Male participants perceived their bosses as less controlling ($m = 3.74, sd = 1.32$) than female participants did ($m = 3.17, sd = 1.17$). [Note: According to the conflict Likert scale used, a lower score indicates a higher perception of control]. Also, the factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant interaction effect for supervisors' biological sex with participants' biological sex on supervisors' conflict *control strategies* behaviors ($F(1, 63) = 1.12, p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .018$. However, only 6.5 percent of the variance in *control* scores was connected to the sex of participants.

When combining the three types of conflict strategies, the factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant main effect for biological sex on supervisors' overall conflict behaviors: ($F(1, 63) = 1.50, p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .023$. Male supervisors presented a similar level of overall conflict behaviors ($m = 4.17, sd = .37$) as female supervisors did ($m = 4.23, sd = .44$). The factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant main effect for participants' biological sex on supervisors' overall conflict behaviors ($F(1, 63) = 2.86, p > .05$), $\eta^2 = .043$. Male participants had a similar perception about supervisors' overall conflict behaviors ($m = 4.28, sd = .48$) as female subordinates had ($m = 4.15, sd = .35$). Also, the factorial ANOVA indicated a non-significant interaction effect for supervisors' biological



sex with male and female subordinates in relation to supervisors' conflict behaviors:

$(F(1, 63) = .82, p > .05), \eta^2 = .013$.

Discussion

This study revealed three major findings. First, supervisors' biological sex does not affect the level of *nonconfrontation*, *solution-orientation* or *control conflict strategies* perceived by male and female subordinates in conflict situation (see Figure 1). Second, both male and female participants have a similar perception about *nonconfrontation* and *solution-orientation conflict strategies* used by male and female supervisors in conflict situation with their subordinates (see Figure 2). The bosses are not perceived as nonconfrontational, because they just "sometimes" or even "seldom" do not engage in control strategies. Therefore, it means that they confront their subordinates sometimes or even often. In addition, bosses are perceived as seldom solution oriented, so they do not frequently seek to resolve the conflicts with their subordinates. Third, male and female participants differently perceive supervisors' *control conflict strategies*, regardless of supervisor's sex (see Figure 2). For male participants, supervisors were perceived to have a lower level of control conflict strategies than for the female participants; this effect accounts for 6.5 percent of the variance, which is considered a medium effect. In addition to these three main findings, the results do not show interaction effects on any of the conflict strategies between participants and supervisors' biological sex.

The first major finding (not significant difference between male and female supervisors' use of conflict strategies) indicates that the biological condition of supervisors (sexed bodies) does not interfere with how they behave in conflict situations.



These results are consistent with what Voelck (2003) reported about management styles of academic library managers. In her research, female and male subordinates similarly describe their supervisors' behaviors in interpersonal relationships. The results show that the female supervisors were evaluated by females and males similarly.

The second major finding (male and female subordinates similarly perceive in a middle level their supervisors' use of *nonconfrontational* and *solution-oriented* strategies) should be analyzed taking into account that in the 7-point Likert OCCI lower scores indicates a high level of the ranged strategies. The score of *nonconfrontational* strategies reached the level near to the middle of the scale (the frequency labeled "sometimes"). It indicates, even though supervisors *sometimes* prefer not to confront directly the conflict or overestimate its importance, they sometimes use confrontational strategies as well, such as: making the differences seem like something important, arguing with their subordinates, and expressing their point of views. The given level of *nonconfrontational* behaviors also suggests that supervisors balance management of power by not raising the level of the conflict to the point where it becomes almost a fight. This balance indicates that supervisors are not using conflict power to abuse their subordinates; therefore, supervisors' balance of power does not confirm the assumption of the critical approach that conceives conflict as a potential indicator of unfair management of power (Miller, 2009).

The similar use by male and female supervisors of *nonconfrontational* strategies implies that all of them sometimes avoid discussing the disagreements. This finding is not consistent with which Voelck (2003) found that women are more friendly and easier to



engage in a conversation than men. Participants' cultural background (most of them were students of a Midwestern state university), as well as their educational level (undergraduate and graduate students) might explain this tendency to be polite and avoid discussing the conflicts face-to-face.

Solution-oriented were basically rated as seldom. This frequency points out that both male and female supervisors, according to the employee's perception, do not necessarily look for constructive ways to find win-win solutions. This tendency does not follow the human resources perspective's assumptions of conflict as an opportunity to achieve beneficial outcomes (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007, Miller, 2003; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Van Slyke, 1999). Nevertheless, not meeting the human resources principles is not the only implication of this finding.

The supervisors' lack of being willing to create alternatives of conflict resolution, to value the subordinates' resolution ideas, and meet them halfway, reinforces the power of the one who defines the "game's rules." In other words, no matter what the subordinates desire, they do not have much choice; they "must" follow what the more powerful force determines. This submission to supervisors' ways reinforces what scholars such as Collins (2005) and Deetz (1995) believed about how power affects the way people respond to organizational matters.

The third major finding (how differently male and female participants perceive supervisors' *control conflict strategies*) indicates that while male participants perceive their supervisors use of control strategies near to the frequency named "sometimes," the female participants perceive this behavior as "often" used by their supervisors. This



finding, which accounts for 6.5 percent of the variance, might point out two different interpretations. One option might address the attention to the interpretation that subordinates' capacity for judging and discerning operates in different ways depending if the person is a man or a women (differences because of biological sex). This judgment would be based on his or her gendered expectations about how they he or she believes a boss should behave because of biological sex. Perhaps, males are less bothered by control strategies and females are more sensitive to these kinds of strategies where the supervisor communicates directly about the problem, maintains his or her point of views, and tries to dominate the situation in his or her favor.

Another option is to interpret that female participants, who were likely workers in the middle and low level of the hierarchy, are the target of being more controlled in organizations, or in other words of being the target of power abuse, a caution that some scholars have previously indicated (Bartol, 1980; DeFrancisco and Palczewski, 2007; Marini, 1990; Powell and Graves, 2003; Schieman and McMullen, 2008; Voelck, 2003).

Conclusions

Along with Schieman and Reid's (2005) considerations that males are not necessarily always rewarded in the workplace, this study found that, in general, the tendency to under evaluate female leaders in comparison to their male counterparts may be changing in the workplace. Therefore, the gendered expectations are not necessarily discriminating between male and female power holders' performance. The extent of this research does not allow the researcher to know the factors that actually could influence this shift toward the equality in the perceptions. Personal traits, organizational culture or



even societal awareness of women and men's equal rights might give some insights. On the other hand, factors such as educational level of the respondents, cultural background, and economic sector (public or private, or even type of industry) where the conflict happened could play some role in the results.

However, female subordinates perceive they are still being the target of more controlling strategies that might contribute to higher levels of distress than for the male subordinates. Even though the significant difference in the supervisor's controlling strategies perceived by male and females is considered a medium effect (6.5 percent of the variance), this situation could be an indicator of unbalanced power management and unfair treatment in the workplace, a situation that deserves the caution which organizational critical scholars have alleged.

On the other hand, the supervisors' poor tendency to look for collaborative conflict resolution strategies needs the attention of human resources areas. Training and communication systems might be strategic allies to improve power holders' attitudes and behaviors toward the positive outcomes of collaborative resolution processes.

Limitations

This research has three kinds of limitations; first regarding focus of study, secondly regarding difficulties with the methodology, and thirdly relating with sample size. The study does not provide information about subordinates' personal traits that could influence their choices. Also, the study does not explore the organizational culture in which the conflict occurred. This information (personal traits and organizational culture) would help to make sense of the findings.



Regarding methodology, two aspects could be improved for future research. One is being aware that online applications using the Firefox browser causes problems if such application is opened using other browsers such as Internet Explorer. Another aspect to be improved is the interpretation of the SPSS outputs. The OCCI scores with two independent variables which were named similarly (both named females and males) made it easy to get confused to interpret the differences when describing male and female subordinates' means (*m*) and the male and female supervisors' means (*m*).

Finally, this research has a small sample size ($n = 67$), that is only 7.12 percent of the total potential participants ($N = 940$). In the future, besides the online administration survey, doing the survey face-to-face in a variety of settings such as university's classrooms, professional associations, companies as well as employing snowball methodology could be useful to get more participants.

Future Research

A stream of research may continue surrounding the topic of conflict in the workplace. As it was stated previously, research can be improved by finding the correlations between organizational culture, subordinates' personal traits, and subordinates' assumptions about organizational power, to enrich our understanding of the surrounding aspects that determine conflict experiences. Also, future studies could investigate what influences the supervisor's behavior, for instance, the relationship between his or her styles in approaching conflict and the way in which he or she was raised or has experienced family relationships.



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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Supervisors' levels of use of conflict strategies

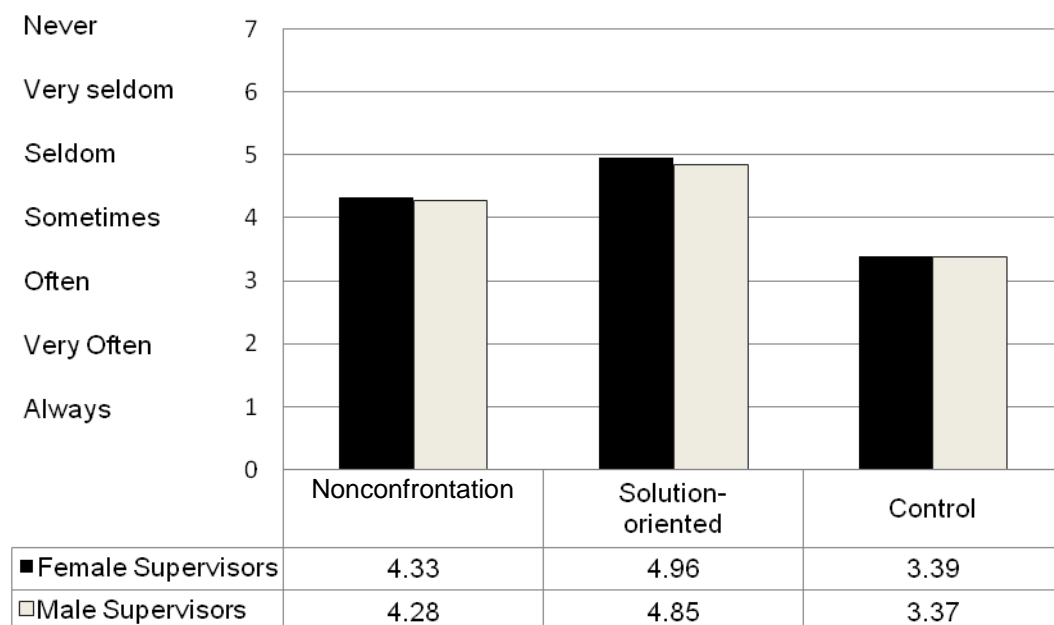
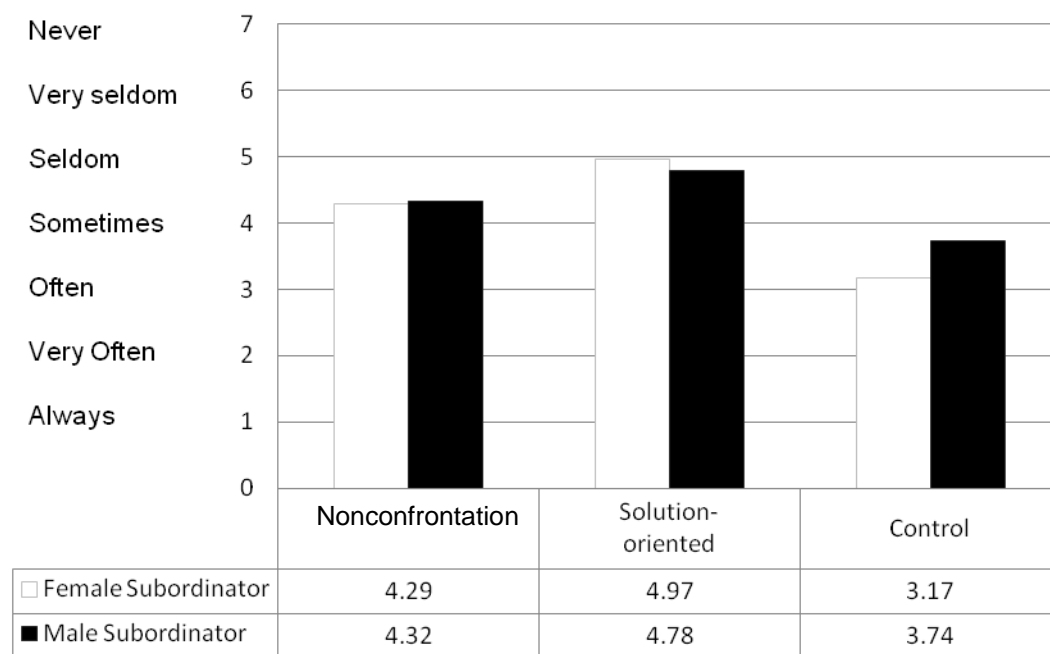




Figure 2. Participants' similar perceptions of supervisors' *nonconfrontation*, and *solution-orientation* conflict strategies, and participants' different perceptions of supervisors' *control* conflict strategies.



Appendix

Survey

Differences About Conflict with Male and Female Supervisors Perceived by Subordinates

(Please, remember to answer all questions. Otherwise, an “Error” will appear on the page.)

Before starting the questionnaire, it is important to know if:

A. In the past time or in the present time, have you had at least one conflict with a supervisor?

☐ Yes ☐ Not

If your answer is NO to the question above, please stop at this point.

CONFLICT TASK SITUATION

Think about a conflict task situation with a supervisor and keep it in your mind as a specific reference to answer the first part of the questionnaire. The conflict situations could be experienced in a past job or in your current one.

Choose just one answer.

B. Biological sex of the supervisor (the one who you are going to refer about in the conflict situation):

☐ Female ☐ Male

Then, in the scale below circle the number of frequency that most closely reflects his/her behaviors in the particular conflict situation.

Always Very often Often Sometimes Seldom Very Seldom Never

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

1. My supervisor blends his/her ideas with others to create new alternatives for resolving a conflict. ()
2. My supervisor shies away from topics that are sources of disputes. ()
3. My supervisor makes his/her opinion known in a disagreement with me. ()
4. My supervisor suggests solutions which combine a variety of view points. ()
5. My supervisor steers clear of disagreeable situations. ()
6. My supervisor gives in a little on my ideas when I also give in. ()
7. My supervisor avoids me when he/she suspects that I want to discuss disagreement. ()
8. My supervisor integrates arguments into a new solution from issues raised in a dispute with me. ()
9. My supervisor will go 50-50 to reach a settlement with me. ()
10. My supervisor raises his/her voice when he/she is trying to get me to accept his/her position. ()
11. My supervisor offers creative solutions in discussions of disagreements. ()
12. My supervisor keeps quiet about his/her views in order to avoid disagreements. ()
13. My supervisor gives in if I will meet him/her halfway. ()
14. My supervisor downplays the importance of a disagreement. ()
15. My supervisor reduces disagreements by making them insignificant. ()
16. My supervisor meets me at a midpoint in our differences. ()

17. My supervisor asserts his/her opinion forcefully. ()
18. My supervisor dominates arguments until I understand his/her position. ()
19. My supervisor suggests we work together to create solutions to disagreements. ()
20. My supervisor tries to use my ideas to generate solutions to problems. ()
21. My supervisor offers trade-offs to reach solutions in a disagreement. ()
22. My supervisor argues insistently for his/her stance. ()

Always Very often Often Sometimes Seldom Very Seldom Never

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

23. My supervisor withdraws when I confront him/her about a controversial issue. ()
24. My supervisor side-steps disagreements when they arise. ()
25. My supervisor tries to smooth over disagreements by making them appear
unimportant. ()
26. My supervisor insists his/her position be accepted during a disagreement with me. ()
27. My supervisor makes our differences seem less serious. ()
28. My supervisor holds his/her tongue rather than argue with me. ()
29. My supervisor eases conflict by claiming our differences are trivial. ()
30. My supervisor stands firm in expressing his/her viewpoints during a disagreement with
me. ()

Demographic Information

C. Your biological sex?

☐ Female ☐ Male

D. Your age?

_____ year old

E. Your nationality?

Please, do NOT write your name

Thank you!