

The Role of Age and Gender of Leaders on Conflict Handling in the Workplace

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Abstract

Dealing with conflicts in the workplace has become a staple in our professional lives. Even though there is ample research on leaders' conflict management strategies, little is known about this in the context of the workplace. Besides, research about leaders is tainted with male overrepresentation while the joint influence of age and gender of a leader remains largely unexplored. In the current study we investigated the effect of the age of a leader moderated by the gender of said leader on conflict handling strategies in the workplace. In line with the literature, we hypothesised that older (female) leaders use more avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving and less forcing than younger (and/or male) leaders. We conducted a field study with questionnaires in which we assessed leaders' conflict handling strategies with self-reported and other reported measures ($N = 121$ dyads of subordinates with their direct supervisors) to be filled in. Results of this study show no support for our hypotheses. On the contrary, our data shows that leaders employ less compromising and problem solving and more forcing the older they were. Additionally, no significant interaction effect of gender was found. We conclude that the results of this study do not support the idea that older (female) leaders use more avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving and less forcing than younger (and/or male leaders). Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: leader, age, gender, conflict handling ,workplace

The Role of Age and Gender of Leaders on Conflict Handling in the Workplace

All people have their own unique perspective on life and how things should be done. We all bring our personal views, ideas and opinions with us, also to our workplaces. This can often lead to conflicting perspectives. In our personal lives we have numerous ways to control whom we attract and accept, such as attracting likeminded individuals and staying clear of those with whom we do not see eye to eye with. However, in the workplace this control is more limited increasing the chance we will be confronted with more people with conflicting views, ideas and opinions.

According to the CPP Global Human Capital Report (2008), employees spend approximately 2.1 hours on a weekly basis, or a day each month, involved in conflict. In addition, the study found that the majority of employees (i.e. 85%) deal with conflicts to some degree, with 29% doing so either 'always' or 'frequently'. To further elaborate, less than half (i.e. 44%) of employees have received training in how to manage workplace conflict (CPP, 2008). Needless to say, dealing with people with conflicting ideas has become a staple in our professional lives, but not everyone knows how. The importance of knowing how to deal with conflicts becomes even more feasible when taking into consideration that conflict management influences individual well-being, group performance and organizational effectiveness (de Dreu et al., 2001). This naturally depends on which conflict handling strategy a leader employs and how this is received by their followers.

There is ample research on the different demographical characteristics that impact what conflict handling strategy a leader is more likely to utilize. Two of these are *age* and *gender*. In short, it is believed that older and female leaders are better in handling conflicts than their younger and male counterparts.

Despite the ample research on the effects of *age* and *gender* on conflict handling strategies, none of the studies have combined these variables in their research design. In other

words, it is still unclear what the effect of *age* moderated by *gender* is on conflict handling strategies. Furthermore, many researches have not yet focussed on the context of the workplace. Most studies focused on the effect of age or gender on conflict handling in general while, as stated before, conflicts frequently arise in the workplace influencing individual's wellbeing, group performance and organizational effectiveness (de Dreu et al., 2001). Therefore it is vital to research what conflict handling strategies are commonly used in the workplace, by which leader, and how this is influenced by age and gender.

Meanwhile, there is also a more societal reason to study this phenomenon. The world of organizational management is vast and everchanging. In current changing times, more and more women acquire leadership positions (Thornton, 2020). However, many studies about conflict handling strategies are still based upon on a more traditional male-overrepresentation when it comes to leadership positions (Valentine, 2004). Needless to say, an increase in female representation in the current literature will contribute to paint a more complete picture.

This paper reports on a field study conducted to contribute to this information gap in organizational psychological literature.

Literature Review

Conflict Management Strategies

People can in general employ five different conflict handling strategies during interpersonal conflicts in the workplace. However, these conflict handling strategies differ in their assertiveness regarding own concerns and constructiveness regarding the relationship. This paper uses the conflict handling strategies as described by de Dreu et al. (2001). De Dreu et al. distinguish conflict management strategies as either *yielding*, *compromising*, *forcing*, *problem solving* and/or *avoiding*.

Yielding is characterized by the unassertive, but constructive element of self-sacrifice to preserve or build the relationship. Meaning that a person that employs a yielding conflict

management style gives in their own gains in order to resolve the conflict. Therefore, this strategy does not help maximising own gains, but does maintain and preserve relationships.

Compromising features medium assertive and constructive behaviour to achieve a middle ground that partially satisfies both parties. A person employing a compromising conflict management style aims to give in a little but also expects the other party to do the same. This strategy does not maximize gains and/or relationships, but focusses on meeting each other halfway.

Forcing shows more assertive and unconstructive behaviours to pursue one's own concerns instead of preserving a good relationship and the concerns of the other parties involved. This strategy does help maximising (short-term) gains, but at the cost of relationships.

Avoiding, is characterized by being unassertive, but constructive. However, it differs from *yielding*, which is also characterized as unassertive, but constructive for the relationship. Avoiding is a form of sidestepping to avoid the whole conflict, whether it be out of anxiety or disinterest. This strategy does not maximise gains and/or relationships, but avoids the conflict all together.

Lastly, *problem solving* is seen as actively being high in assertiveness regarding own concerns and constructiveness regarding the relationship. This style aims to satisfy all concerns by coming up with new inventive ways to solve each issue within the conflict. This strategy is known for its opportunity to maximise gains and/or relationships. However, a person employing such a conflict management style must be inventive to come up with solutions that serve all parties involved. This may be proven time-consuming, difficult, or even impossible.

Of all these strategies, yielding, compromising and problem solving show positive significant correlations when it comes to overall effectiveness at resolving conflict in the long

run (Sadri & Rahmation, 2003). However, note that this does not automatically mean a maximization of one's own gains.

Which conflict handling strategies are used, differs from leader to leader and from situation to situation. Despite this, age and gender are known to have an impact on which strategies are more likely chosen by people to resolve the conflicts they are facing.

The Role of Age on Leaders' Conflict Management Strategies

Previous research has repeatedly shown age differences in conflict handling strategies of leaders (Beitler et al., 2018; Briditt et al., 2005; Blanchard-Fields et al., 2004; Charles et al., 2009; Yeung et al., 2012; Yeung, Fung & Chan, 2014) in the workplace (Beitler et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2009). These studies show conclusive results; older leaders employ more constructive strategies, such as avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving compared to younger leaders. In contrast, younger leader employ more destructive and assertive strategies, such as forcing.

This difference in conflict handling due to age can be explained through the following theory. Older leaders score higher on emotional intelligence (Beitler et al., 2018; Charles, 2010; Labouvie-Vief, 2003) and have a greater orientation towards positive maintenance of relationships than younger leaders (Cartensen, 2006). Emotional intelligence is the accumulative intelligence of the *recognition, understanding* and *regulation* of emotions (Mayor & Salovey, 1997).

Older leaders are generally better in both *understanding* the emotions of others (Mayor & Salovey, 1997) and *regulating* their own emotional experiences and expressions (Gross, 1998) than younger leaders. The reason for this is mere exposure and experience. As people are confronted more with emotional situations, they learn to better understand and resolve such situations (Blanchard-Fields, 2007). Not surprisingly, older leaders also describe themselves as having better relationships than younger leaders (Fingerman & Charles, 2010).

On the other hand, older leaders are generally weaker in the *recognition* of emotional experiences and expressions in others due to cognitive decline (Richter & Kunzmann, 2011; Ruffman, Henry, Livingstone, & Phillips, 2008). The cognitive decline that comes with growing older, results in being less active and attentive for subtle emotional and expressive changes in others which demands cognitive control and energy to recognize. Meaning that it might take a little longer for an older leader (compared to younger leaders) to be aware of the emotional changes in others.

These changes in emotional intelligence are believed to be important predictors of effective leadership and conflict management strategies (Walter et al., 2011). For example, these changes enable older leaders to better identify followers' personal and task-related issues and to act upon these effectively and in line with the followers' emotional needs (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; George, 2000). Moreover, the regulation, and lack of emotional suppression, are also seen as vital leadership elements (Humphrey, Pollack & Hawver, 2008).

In addition, it is also said that as people grow older, they also become more stubborn and stuck in their ways unwilling to yield, bend or compromise (Heid et al., 2016). How this relates to the conflict management strategy of yielding is still unknown.

However, age is not the only demographical characteristic that is likely to influence conflict handling strategies. Another important factor is gender.

The Moderating Role of Gender

Previous gender studies have shown that female leaders are more likely to use less-assertive and more constructive conflict strategies, such as avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving (Chamn & Schneer, 1984; Chusnur & Mills, 1989; Fitzpatnck & Winke, 1979; Kimmel et al., 1980; Miller, 1991; Rahim, 1983; Sadri & Rahmatian, 2003 Terhune, 1970; Valentine, 2004) compared to their male counterparts. It is said that female leaders are more caring, cooperative and people orientated (Valentine, 2004), whereas male leaders are

more decisive, competitive and task-oriented (Sadri & Rahmation, 2003). This also impacts their preferred conflict management strategy. Female leaders are more likely to prefer, utilize and receive a less assertive approach, whereas male leaders are more likely to prefer, utilize and receive a more direct and assertive approach.

As a side note, when it comes to gender, we must not forget the influences of stereotypes, societal and cultural norms, all of which affect how people learn to form their own gender roles and differentiate between gender roles of others through active learning (i.e. gender schema theory (Bem, 1981)) and reinforcement, punishment and modelling (i.e. social learning theory (Bandura, 1977)). Leaders are not excluded from this influence. However, for the sake of conciseness this paper will not go into detail regarding these influences.

Hypotheses

Firstly, and in line with the aforementioned theory, one would expect that older leaders employ more constructive conflict handling strategies, such as avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving, as opposed to younger leaders,. They do not only have more emotional ability to do so, but also a greater motivation to preserve good relationships. In contrast, younger leaders are expected to employ more destructive conflict handling strategies, such as forcing, as they have less regulatory control over their emotions and less understanding of the emotions of others'. This leads us to the first hypothesis of this paper.

Hypothesis 1. Older leaders will display more avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving and less forcing than younger leaders.

Secondly, and also in line with the aforementioned theory, one would expect that older, female leaders, are more likely to employ more constructive conflict handling strategies, as opposed to other leaders of any sort. Being a female leader adds even more to being people-oriented, caring and constructive in regards to relationships. In contrast,

younger, male leaders are more likely to employ more destructive conflict handling strategies. This leads us to the second hypothesis of this paper.

Hypothesis 2. Older, female leaders will display more avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving and less forcing than younger and/or male leaders.

In a field study, we recruited supervisors (i.e. leaders) and invited them to fill out a questionnaire about the conflict management strategies they employ during workplace conflicts with their subordinates resulting in self-reported data. In order to also collect other-reported data about the conflict management strategies of these supervisors, we also recruited their subordinates and asked them to fill out a similar questionnaire.

Method

Participants

A total of 121 supervisor-subordinate dyads (i.e. 242 participants in total) took part in this study. All participants were Dutch.

Of all supervisors 45 (37,2 %) were female, 75 (62 %) male and 1 (0,8%) did not answer the question about gender. The group of supervisors had a mean age of 38,9 years old ($SD = 13$). Among the supervisors 31 (25,6%) had a university degree (i.e. WO), 46 (38%) a higher professional education degree (i.e. HBO), 12 (9,9%) a higher general secondary education degree (i.e. VWO, HAVO), 26 (21,5%) an intermediate vocational education degree (i.e. MBO), 2 (1,7%) preparatory secondary vocational education (i.e. VMBO), 4 (3,3%) a lower vocational education degree and lastly 0 (0%) had only completed primary school. 14 (12,3%) stated to be in top management, 37 (32,5%) in middle management, 57 (50%) in lower management and 6 (5,3%) in a highly specialized function, such as a specialized project manager. The group of supervisors worked an average of 38,5 hours per week ($SD = 11,2$) and had been working at their current companies for 9,4 years on average ($SD = 9,6$). On average, the group of supervisors supervised 18 employees ($SD = 21$).

Of all subordinates 61 (50,4%) were female, 57 (47,1%) male and 2 (1,7%) did not answer the question about gender. The group of subordinates had a mean age of 28,7 years old ($SD = 10,7$). Among the subordinates 19 (15,8%) had a university degree (i.e. WO), 27 (22,5%) a higher professional education degree (i.e. HBO), 20 (16,7%) a higher general secondary education degree (i.e. VWO, HAVO), 36 (30%) an intermediate vocational education degree (i.e. MBO), 10 (8,3%) preparatory secondary vocational education (i.e. VMBO), 5 (4,1%) a lower vocational education degree and lastly 3 (2,5%) had only completed primary school. The group of subordinates worked an average of 26 hours per week ($SD = 11,7$) and had been working at their current companies for 4,9 years on average ($SD = 6,2$).

All participants were recruited by third-year psychology bachelor students using a convenience sample located around Groningen, the Netherlands. These students used their own social networks and visited numerous organisations in and around Groningen to recruit all dyads. Participation was voluntary and no compensation for participation was given.

According to a sensitivity analysis (G*power) for a fixed-effect ANOVA with two conditions, the present sample gives 95% power to detect a large effect size (Cohen's $f = 0.47$).

Research Design and Procedure

For the current research we designed a field study where we measured supervisors' conflict handling strategies (i.e. yielding, compromising, forcing, problem solving & avoiding) as indicated by themselves (i.e. self-reported data) and their subordinates (i.e. other-reported data). The questionnaire was in Dutch. The complete questionnaire had a duration of approximately 15 minutes.¹ For this questionnaire an ethical approval was obtained from the

¹ This research is part of a larger research concerning leadership, age and gender. For this reason, the questionnaire covered more topics besides conflict handling. However, this research paper focusses only on what the effect of *age* moderated by *gender* is on supervisors' conflict handling strategies in the workplace.

Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen (i.e. RUG). Participants answered using printed versions of the questionnaire only.

To ensure anonymity the study participants received three envelopes (i.e. two small envelopes and one big envelop) together with the questionnaires. After a participant filled in the questionnaire, they were asked to put the completed questionnaire in a small envelop and seal it after that. Hereafter, both small envelopes were put in the big envelop, which was also sealed afterwards. In this way, this study ensured anonymity and kept the dyads together. In addition, all questionnaires were coded with a unique pair of numbers. The pair of numbers included a dyad number and a participant number (e.g. 31 (dyad number) – 62 (participant number))

Measures

Conflict Handling Strategies

For the assessment of supervisors' conflict handling strategies we used the 20-item conflict handling strategies questionnaire adjusted to the specifics of this study (de Dreu et al., 2001). The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements. For each conflict handling strategy four statements were included. The yielding conflict handling strategy included items such as: *"I try to accommodate the other party"*. The compromising conflict handling strategy included items such as: *"I insist we both give in a little"*. The forcing conflict handling strategy included items such as: *"I do everything to win"*. The problem solving conflict handling strategy included items such as: *"I stand for my own and other's goals and interest"*. Lastly, the avoiding conflict handling strategy included items such as: *"I try to avoid a confrontation with the other"*. (The complete scale can be found in Appendix A). We used a 7-point scale (*1 = absolutely not true, 7 = absolutely true*).

Supervisors filled the questionnaire about conflict handling strategies in for themselves (i.e. self-reported data; example item: *"I mostly give in to the wishes of my*

subordinates’) and subordinates rated the conflict managements strategies of their supervisors (i.e. other-reported data; example item: ‘*My supervisor mostly gives in to my wishes*’).

Table 1 shows the Cronbach’s α (alpha) of each subscale. Since this study used both self-reported data and other reported data, each subscale has two Cronbach’s α .

Table 1.

Cronbach’s α (alpha) for each subscale

	Avoiding		Yielding		Compromising		Problem Solving		Forcing	
	L	S	L	S	L	S	L	S	L	S
Cronbach’s α	.812	.857	.867	.866	.888	.777	.922	.916	.809	.900

Note. The Cronbach’s α (alpha) for the self-reported data (i.e. supervisors’ data) are indicated by L, and the other reported data (i.e. subordinates’ data) by S.

Age, gender and other demographic characteristics

For the assessment of the independent variable, age, we included a question asking the age of the participants. Participants were asked to answer in years.

Furthermore, for the assessment of the moderator, gender, we included a question asking the gender of the participants. Participants could answer with male, female or other.

For the assessment of education, we included a question asking the highest level of education of the participants. Participants could answer with a university degree, a higher professional education degree, a higher general secondary education degree, an intermediate vocational education degree, preparatory secondary vocational education, a lower vocational education degree and lasty primary school diploma. Additionally, we included one question regarding the hours participants worked per week and one question regarding the years participants had been working at their current companies. Lastly, we asked the supervisors the number of subordinates they currently supervise.

Results

Our model including the age and gender of supervisors accounted for a significant amount of variance in the other reported data (i.e. subordinate data) in the supervisors' conflict handling strategies of compromising, problem solving and forcing. In the other reported data significant main effects of age were found on the supervisors' conflict handling strategies of comprising, problem solving and forcing. No significant main effects of gender were found. Furthermore, no significant interaction effects were found between the age and gender of supervisors.

Supervisors' Conflict Handling Strategies

To test the hypothesis that supervisors' conflict handling strategies are affected by age, and more specifically whether this effect is moderated by gender, we submitted the supervisors' age and gender to a moderation analysis (i.e. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for dummy variables) using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012). The outcome variable for this analysis was the conflict handling strategies of supervisors.

In the first step, two variables were included: the age and gender of the supervisors. As shown in Table 2 (see next page), these two variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in this study's other reported data in supervisors' tendency to employ a compromising strategy, $R^2 = .080$, $F(3, 112) = 3,26$, $p = .024$. It was found that the main effect of age of the supervisors was negative and significantly predicted supervisors' compromising ($\beta = -.021$, $p = .02$). However, no significant main effect of gender was found ($\beta = .326$, $p = .150$). Secondly, it was also found in the other reported data that age and gender accounted for a significant amount of variance in supervisors' tendency to employ a problem solving strategy, $R^2 = .114$, $F(3, 111) = 4,76$, $p = .004$.

Table 2.

The Pearson correlations coefficients (r), R -squared (R^2) and p -values regarding the effect of age and gender on each conflict handling strategy

Conflict Handling Strategy	L or S	r	R^2	p
Avoiding	L	.145	.021	.507
	S	.199	.04	.221
Yielding	L	.236	.056	.09
	S	.191	.036	.257
Compromising	L	.194	.038	.232
	S	.283	.080	.024
Problem Solving	L	.246	.060	.07
	S	.338	.114	.004
Forcing	L	.107	.011	.730
	S	.300	.09	.014

Note. The self-reported data (i.e. supervisors' data) are indicated by L, and the other reported data (i.e. subordinates' data) by S.

It was found that the main effect of age of the supervisors was negative and significantly predicted supervisors' problem solving ($\beta = -.034, p < .001$). On the other hand, again no significant main effect of gender was found ($\beta = -.018, p = .942$).

Additionally, it was also found in the other reported data that age and gender accounted for a significant amount of variance in supervisors' tendency to employ a forcing strategy, $R^2 = .09, F(3, 112) = 3,68, p = .014$. It was found that the main effect of age of the supervisors was positive and significantly predicted supervisors' forcing ($\beta = .025, p = .032$). However, no significant main effect of gender was found ($\beta = -.373, p = .212$).

Besides the aforementioned significant results, our data also show significant main effects of age in the self-reported data, namely in supervisors' tendency to employ yielding ($\beta = -.02, p = .013$) and problem solving ($\beta = -.021, p = .024$). However, these results come from models in which age and gender did not account for a significant amount of variance. As

shown in Table 2, these age and gender did not account for a significant amount of variance for yielding ($R^2 = .056$, $F(3, 113) = 2.22$, $p = .09$) or problem solving ($R^2 = .060$, $F(3, 113) = 2.42$, $p = .07$).

To avoid potentially problematic high multicollinearity with the interaction term, the variables were centered and an interaction term between the age and gender of the supervisors was created (Aiken & West, 1991). Hereafter, this interaction term was added to the regression model. As shown in Table 3, the interaction term between age and gender did not account for any significant changes in conflict handling strategies.

Table 3.

The beta coefficient (β), the standard error (se), 95% confidence intervals (CI) and p -values (p) regarding the interaction effect of age and gender on each conflict handling strategy

Conflict Handling Strategy	L or S	β	se	95% CI		p
				LL	UL	
Avoiding	L	.009	.021	-.033	.051	.676
	S	.004	.022	-.040	.047	.872
Yielding	L	<.001	.017	-.034	.034	.998
	S	.016	.018	-.020	.052	.383
Compromising	L	-.009	.022	-.052	.034	.677
	S	.003	.018	-.033	.039	.854
Problem Solving	L	.021	.019	-.017	.058	.280
	S	.003	.02	-.306	.041	.898
Forcing	L	-.011	.020	-.051	.029	.576
	S	-.045	.024	-.092	.003	.065

Note. The self-reported data (i.e. supervisors' data) are indicated by L, and the other reported data (i.e. subordinates' data) by S.

Discussion

In this study we researched the effect of age and gender of leaders on conflict handling strategies in the workplace, and more specifically whether this effect is moderated by gender. We recruited supervisors (i.e. leaders) to examine this.

In line with the literature on the effect of age on emotional intelligence (Beitler et al., 2018; Charles, 2010; Labouvie-Vief, 2003) and orientation within relationships (Cartensen, 2006) it was hypothesised that older supervisors would display more avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving and less forcing than younger supervisors. The results obtained in this study do not support this hypothesis. The significant results of this study actually show the contrary. This studies' other reported data show a negative predictive relation between the age of supervisors and the supervisors' conflict handling strategies of compromising and problem solving. In addition, the same data show a positive predictive relation between the age of supervisors and the supervisors' conflict handling strategy of forcing. In other words, based on the data of the subordinates who participated in this study, supervisors employed less compromising and problem solving and more forcing the older the supervisors were. A theory that can explain these results is that older people grow more stubborn (Heid et al., 2016), which might render them unable/unwilling to compromise and problem solve while making them more prone to force. What the exact effect of stubbornness is on conflict handling strategies is yet to be uncovered.

In line with the literature on the effect of gender (Chamn & Schneer, 1984; Chusnur & Mills, 1989; Fitzpatnck & Winke, 1979; Kimmel et al., 1980; Miller, 1991; Rahim, 1983; Sadri & Rahmatian, 2003 Terhune, 1970; Valentine, 2004) it was also hypothesised that gender would moderate the effect of age on conflict handling strategies. Alternatively put, we expected that older, female supervisors would display more avoiding, yielding, compromising

and problem solving and less forcing compared to male and/or younger supervisors. The results obtained in this study do not support this hypothesis either, as there were no significant moderation effects found. A factor that might explain this studies' non-significant results is the Dutch culture. Dutch culture is known for its low scores on the dimensions of power distance and masculinity, while scoring very high on the dimension of individualism (Hofstede et al., 2010). One might argue that this can level the behavioural tendencies, and more specifically the conflict handling behaviours, between male and female supervisors in the Netherlands. What the exact effect of culture is on conflict handling strategies is yet to be uncovered.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of our study is that all participants for this study were recruited in Groningen, the Netherlands. Meaning, all supervisors and subordinates that participated in this study were Dutch. Besides the earlier suggested effect this can have on the insignificance of the moderation effect of gender in this study, it also enables a representation bias. In contrast, the results of this study might be proven insightful to represent Dutch supervisors. Future research may consider a more international pool of participants and include culture as a variable in the research design. In this way, the role of gender potentially moderated by culture on conflict handling strategies can be examined.

Another limitation of our study is the use of a convenience sample. All participants were recruited by the use of personal networks of third year psychology bachelor students and by visiting companies in Groningen. This recruitment process may be problematic in the context of anonymity and representation bias, since for example it did occur that while visiting companies the questionnaire was given to, and picked up from, supervisors who themselves could choose the subordinates who would fill them in. Future research may

consider a more anonymous and (inter)national way of recruiting participants, such as the use of an international and online network of supervisors and subordinates.

Furthermore, another limitation of our study is the occurrence of non-conflict in the workplace. In our questionnaire participants were asked about the frequency of conflict in the workplace. After this section, the participants were asked what kind of conflict handling strategies are used by the supervisor in the workplace. While processing the data it regularly occurred that participants did not experience conflict in the workplace at all or rarely. This may be problematic in the context of the amount of experience both supervisor and subordinate have to base the supervisors' conflict handling strategies on. Future research may consider excluding participants with little to no experience with conflicts in the workplace.

The last limitation of our study is the significant main effects in the self-reported data of supervisors' age on supervisors' tendency to employ yielding and problem solving. Even though the models which gave these results did not account for a significant amount of variance, these significant main effects were found.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our study has theoretical implications, since it illuminates a significant effect of age on supervisors' conflict handling strategies of compromising, problem solving and forcing. Our results do, however, not support the theory that older supervisors are generally more constructive in conflict handling style. In turn, our results raise various questions about potential third variables, such as stubbornness.

Another theoretical implication is that our results do not support the notion that age is significantly moderated by gender. This also raises various questions about the role of gender on conflict handling strategy. Do behavioural gender differences in conflict style equalize as people grow older? Perhaps potential third variables, such as culture, can explain the insignificance of this study's results.

As far as the practical implications are concerned, the results of our study may provide important insight to organisations and organizational psychology. Interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup conflicts do frequently arise in the workplace (CPP, 2008) and has become a staple in our professional lives. Knowing how to deal with conflicts constructively becomes even more feasible taking into consideration that conflict management influences individual well-being, group performance and organizational effectiveness (de Dreu et al., 2001). This study provides insight into how universal characteristics (i.e. age and gender), may play a role in our tendencies to deal with conflicts. Organizational psychologists, Human Resources employees and everyone who could find themselves strangled in workplace related conflict (which can be any of us) would do well to gain insight in our conflicts handling tendencies.

Conclusions

In short, the results provided by this study do not support the theory that older leaders employ more constructive conflict handling strategies (i.e. avoiding, yielding, compromising and problem solving) and less destructive conflict handling strategies (i.e. forcing). On the contrary, our data shows that leaders employ less compromising and problem solving and more forcing the older they were. In addition, this study also does not provide support for the moderation effect of gender on age. No significant results were found that support the idea that older, female leaders employ more constructive conflict handling strategies and less destructive conflict handling strategies than male and/or younger leaders.

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Appendix A: Conflict Management Strategy Inventory

Supervisor version

Everyone has his/her own way to deal with conflicts and disagreements with others. How do you usually deal with conflicts or disagreements that you may have with your subordinates?

What is usually your reaction to your subordinates when you disagree on certain things?

Please note that the actual conflict handling strategies (i.e. yielding, compromising etc.) were not stated in the questionnaire.

Yielding

1. I usually give in to the wishes of my subordinates.
2. I often concur (agree) with my subordinates.
3. I usually try to accommodate my subordinates.
4. I usually adapt to my subordinates' goals and interests.

Compromising

5. I usually try to find a middle ground solution.
6. I usually emphasize that my subordinates and I have to find a compromising solution.
7. I often insist that both my subordinates and I give in a little.
8. I usually strive whenever possible towards a fifty-fifty compromise.

Forcing

9. I usually push my own point of view.
10. I usually search for gains for myself.
11. I usually fight for a good outcome for myself.
12. I often do everything to maximize my own gains.

Problem Solving

13. I usually examine issues until I find a solution that really satisfies me and my subordinates.
14. I usually stand for my own and my subordinates' goals and interests.

15. I often examine ideas from both mine and my subordinates' sides to find a mutually optimal solution.
16. I usually work out a solution that serves my own as well as my subordinates' interests as best as possible.

Avoiding

17. I usually avoid a confrontation about my differences with my subordinates.
18. I avoid differences of opinion with my subordinates as much as possible.
19. I usually try to make differences of opinion look less severe.
20. I usually try to avoid a confrontation with my subordinates.

(20 questions) (1 = not at all true, 7 = absolutely true)

Subordinate version

Everyone has his/her own way to deal with conflicts and disagreements with others. How does your supervisor usually deal with conflicts or disagreements with you? What is usually his reaction to you when you disagree on certain things?

Please note that the actual conflict handling strategies (i.e. yielding, compromising etc.) were not stated in the questionnaire.

Yielding

1. My supervisor usually gives in to my wishes.
2. My supervisor often concurs (agrees) with me.
3. My supervisor usually tries to accommodate me.
4. My supervisor usually adapts to my goals and interests.

Compromising

5. My supervisor usually tries to find a middle ground solution.
6. My supervisor usually emphasizes that we have to find a compromising solution.
7. My supervisor often insists we both give in a little.

8. My supervisor strives whenever possible towards a fifty-fifty compromise.

Forcing

9. My supervisor usually pushes their own point of view.

10. My supervisor usually searches for gains for him/herself.

11. My supervisor usually fights for a good outcome for him/herself.

12. My supervisor often does everything to maximize his/her own gains.

Problem Solving

13. My supervisor usually examines issues until they finds a solution that really satisfies both of us.

14. My supervisor usually stands for his/her own and my goals and interests.

15. My supervisor often examines ideas from both sides to find a mutually optimal solution.

16. My supervisor usually works out a solution that serves his/her own as well as my interests as best as possible.

Avoiding

17. My supervisor usually avoids a confrontation about our differences

18. My supervisor avoids differences of opinion between us as much as possible.

19. My supervisor usually tries to make our differences of opinion look less severe.

20. My supervisor usually tries to avoid a confrontation with me.

(20 questions) (1 = not at all true, 7 = absolutely true)