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Shared perceptions of supervisor conflict management style: A cross-level moderator of relationship conflict and employee outcomes

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the extent to which employee outcomes (anxiety/depression, bullying and workers' compensation claims thoughts) are affected by shared perceptions of supervisor conflict management style (CMS). Further, this study aims to assess cross-level moderating effects of supervisor CMS climate on the positive association between relationship conflict and these outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – Multilevel modeling was conducted using a sample of 401 employees nested in 69 workgroups.

Findings – High collaborating, low yielding and low forcing climates (positive supervisor climates) were associated with lower anxiety/depression, bullying and claim thoughts. Unexpectedly, the direction of moderation showed that the positive association between relationship conflict and anxiety/depression and bullying was stronger for positive supervisor CMS climates than for negative supervisor CMS climates (low collaborating, high yielding and high forcing). Nevertheless, these interactions revealed that positive supervisor climates were the most effective at reducing anxiety/depression and bullying when relationship conflict was low. For claim thoughts, positive supervisor CMS climates had the predicted stress-buffering effects.

Research limitations/implications – Employees benefit from supervisors creating positive CMS climates when dealing with conflict as a third party, and intervening when conflict is low, when their intervention is more likely to minimize anxiety/depression and bullying.

Originality/value – By considering the unique perspective of employees' shared perceptions of supervisor CMS, important implications for the span of influence of supervisor behavior on employee well-being have been indicated.

Keywords Conflict management, Climate, Claims, Employee strain, Multilevel, Supervisors

Paper type Research paper

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Better understanding of workgroup climates of conflict management, and the supervisor's role in these climates, is important in determining group-level factors that may influence negative employee outcomes from exposure to relationship conflict. While conflict at work has been extensively studied at the individual level, there is limited consideration of group-level variables and their potential effect on links between conflict and strain (Gelfand *et al.*, 2012). In particular, there is limited attention to the supervisor as a third party in the conflict-strain research, even though responding to workgroup conflict is an important supervisor function (Guttman, 2008). As early as 1973, Mintzberg (1973) identified a key role for leaders as disturbance handlers. This aspect of a supervisor's role was reinforced more recently when managers across 40 countries agreed that "Building and Mending Relationships" was one of three competencies important for success (Gentry and Sparks, 2011). Further, while early work found that middle managers spent 26 per cent of their time managing conflict (K.W. Thomas, 1976), a study conducted almost 20 years later found that reaching agreement with others about conflict accounts for up to 42 per cent of a manager's time (Watson and Hoffman, 1996).

Approaching our investigation from the theoretical perspective of stress and coping, while also integrating conflict theory, we argue that the workgroup-level perception of supervisor third-party responses to conflict is a fundamentally important driver in the well-being of employees. Specifically, we argue that a shared group-level perception of supervisor conflict management style (CMS), or supervisor CMS climate, has a direct effect on anxiety/depression, experiences of bullying and serious thoughts about making a workers' compensation claim. In addition, as represented in Figure 1, supervisor CMS climate is proposed to have an interactive effect with relationship conflict, whereby CMS climate moderates the positive association of individual-level relationship conflict with anxiety/depression, bullying and thoughts about making a

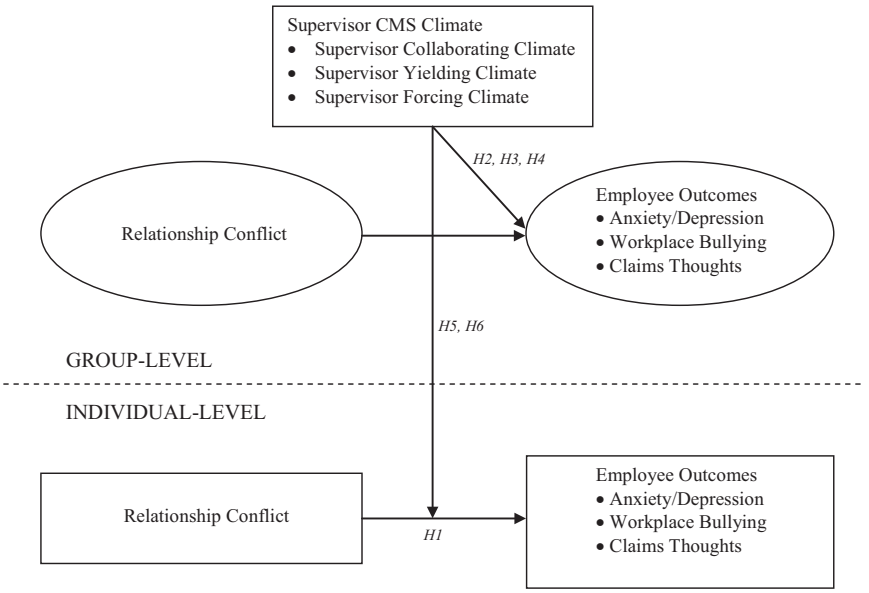


Figure 1.
Proposed main and cross-level moderating effects of supervisor CMS climate on employee outcomes

workers' compensation claim. This climate perspective, with its focus on the supervisor, extends the conflict strain literature by providing a cross-level perspective that has not yet been considered.

Theoretical background

Work stressors are demands that are perceived as a threat by employees, whereas strains refer to the undesirable responses that are prompted when such demands exceed the coping resources of employees (Koslowsky, 1998). An imbalance between demands and resources results in variation in either the physical or psychological state of the employee, such that they deviate from normal functioning (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). In the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), job demands are those aspects of the work that through continuous application of skill or effort are associated with physical or psychological cost. Job resources, on the other hand, are work characteristics that support employees, having a positive impact on growth and development.

In our study, we conceptualize our focal variables as demands, resources and strains. In this respect, relationship conflict is viewed as a demand that requires sustained psychological effort in an attempt to navigate its course, thereby creating strain or stress reactions for employees, such as anxiety/depression, the experience of bullying and claim thoughts. Similarly, we argue that negative supervisor CMS climates can be conceived as a demand because employees must expend psychological effort to cope with negative supervisor behaviors. Conversely, we conceptualize positive supervisor CMS climates as a resource that supports employees, and are associated with reduced psychological costs.

In addition to main effects, the JD-R model proposes interactions between demands and resources. We argue that positive forms of supervisor CMS climate will buffer (or reduce) the strength of positive association between relationship conflict and employee stress reactions, while also acknowledging that negative forms of supervisor CMS climate will exacerbate stress reactions. As well as using occupational stress theory to explain relationships, we utilize the conflict management literature to more clearly articulate the specific types of behaviors that supervisors may engage in when managing relationship conflict among workgroup members. Theory underpinning supervisors' conflict handling style is the conflict management taxonomy/grid (Blake and Mouton, 1964) and the dual concern theory (Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Thomas, 1992), where supervisors may handle conflict in their workgroup by collaborating, yielding, forcing or avoiding.

Relationship conflict and employee outcomes

Relationship conflict refers to inter-personal issues and differences in values, political ideas or personal attributes and taste (De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997). It has been found to have strong predictable associations with negative affective reactions (De Wit *et al.*, 2012), lower levels of well-being, and higher levels of anxiety and depression (De Dreu *et al.*, 2004; Spector and Jex, 1998). When taking a workplace stress perspective, relationship conflict is a job demand that may thwart an individual's goal-directed action (Quick *et al.*, 1997), and trigger negative emotions affecting self-esteem, self-worth and similarity with others (Frone, 2000).

Bullying is defined as negative acts that are systematic and persistent (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). While some have argued that bullying can be purely predatory or driven by work design and organizational sanction of aggressive behavior (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011; Leymann, 1996), others have argued that conflict is an antecedent to bullying (Baillien and De Witte, 2009; Zapf and Gross, 2001). It is for this reason that we investigate bullying as an outcome arising from relationship conflict.

Workers' compensation systems aim to provide monetary compensation or other support (e.g. rehabilitation treatment) to employees suffering an injury or illness, including a mental disorder that has arisen from their work. The number of claims relating to mental disorders is often used to infer the incidence of work-attributable anxiety or depression. However, it is well accepted that a number of factors influence employees' decision to make a workers' compensation claim for a stress-related reason. Such factors include fear of retaliation and career limitations (Roberts and Markel, 2001). Therefore, while the number of claims may be a blunt indicator of prevalence, measuring employees' thoughts about making a workers' compensation claim allows the investigation of psychological antecedents to coping strategies used when exposed to relationship conflict.

In our study, we seek to replicate and build on findings of associations between relationship conflict and the outcomes of anxiety/depression and experience of bullying, and explore whether there are new relationships to be found between relationship conflict and serious thoughts about making a workers' compensation claim:

H1. High relationship conflict will be associated with high anxiety/depression, bullying and claim thoughts.

Supervisor behavior and conflict

Supervisors as a third party to conflict

In this study, supervisor third-party intervention is conceptualized as a specific conflict management strategy used by the supervisor when he or she is acting as a third party to a dispute between others (Giebels and Janssen, 2005). Sourcing third-party help has long been acknowledged as an important conflict management strategy that can be used by disputants (see Deutsch, 1990, for a review), with some authors finding that it buffers the association between inter-personal (or relationship) conflict and conflict stress (Giebels and Janssen, 2005). The effectiveness of third-party help is due to its utility in distilling the issues at hand and increasing a sense of control for parties to the conflict (Arnold and O'Connor, 1999). The vast majority of empirical studies in the area of third-party help have focused on formal or professional helpers providing mediation, adjudication or conciliation (Putnam, 1994). We argue, however, that accessing formal mediation, adjudication or conciliation can be quite different from the type of third-party help a supervisor may provide. Supervisors may identify conflict early and intervene, in some form, to minimize conflict escalation. In this respect, supervisors have the opportunity to respond in real time as events happen (Way *et al.*, 2011). Other authors support this role of supervisors, suggesting that the organizational authority that supervisors hold, including status, powers of coercion and associated options for rewards, has an impact on the way supervisor conflict interventions are perceived by employees (Kolb, 1986; Kolb and Sheppard, 1985; Kozan *et al.*, 2014).

The role of the supervisor in responding as a third party to conflict in the workgroup has had relatively little empirical research attention, and we know little about which

supervisor CMSs have functional or dysfunctional effects (Way *et al.*, 2014). Much of the research has been theoretical (Putnam, 1994) or inductive, where managers themselves have been asked about their CMS (Pinkley *et al.*, 1995; Shapiro and Rosen, 1994). Alternatively, CMS has been analyzed at the individual level, assessing how the individual's perception of manager's third-party CMS influenced individual-level perceptions of fairness (Karambayya and Brett, 1989) or conflict stress (Römer *et al.*, 2012). Although CMSs have been studied at the individual level, there have been very few studies assessing these as a group-level construct with group-level outcomes (Gelfand *et al.*, 2012, for an exception), and none examining the group's perception of their leader's CMS and its cross-level effects.

Supervisor CMS climate

In their review of organizational culture and climate, Schneider *et al.* (2013) note that the construct of "climate" focuses on behaviors, operations and practices, and is typically studied using quantitative measurement techniques. We argue that supervisor CMS climate focuses on shared perceptions of supervisor CM practices and behaviors within distinct "workgroups" to which employees belong, frequently engage with to achieve goals and have a sense of affiliation with (Anderson and West, 1998). Given that supervisors are typically the organizationally sanctioned individuals responsible for setting and enforcing behavioral rules and expectations within their workgroup, we argue that the workgroup's observation of the supervisor's response to conflict will result in shared perceptions of their supervisor's CMS or a workgroup-level supervisor CMS climate.

To further explain why we might expect a shared group-level perception of supervisor CMS to develop, we draw on the social relations model (Kenny *et al.*, 1996). This model argues that behaviors are a function of the actor (or in our case, the supervisor), the person/s they are interacting with and the relationship between the parties. Although this model has been applied primarily in dyadic situations, empirical work has demonstrated cross-partner consistency accounting for 20-30 per cent of the variance in the actor's behavior (Snijders and Kenny, 1999), and also, with more relevance to CMSs, those who display competitive or non-competitive behaviors tend to display these behaviors consistently across all partners (Kenny *et al.*, 1996). Further, recent work by Saeed *et al.* (2014) found leadership styles, which show stability over time, are significantly related to supervisor CMS. We argue that these findings support the notion that supervisors would have some consistency in their behaviors when conflict occurs in their teams, and that employees observing these behaviors over time would provide ample stimulus for a shared perception of supervisor CMS. Such a proposition also is influenced by the empirical work of Gelfand *et al.* (2012), who found support for a relationship between supervisor self-reported CMS and workgroup-level CMS. In that study, using a workgroup-leader matched sample of 92 bank branches, they found significant associations between the leader's self-reported CMS and the group-level CMS in the branch.

In recognizing the potential for employee outcomes from exposure to certain negative behaviors in groups, Okimoto and Wenzel (2014) argue that observers not involved in workplace transgressions still experience a threat to shared group norms and values, and to broader group status and respect. Authors also have argued that employees observing perceived mistreatment of co-workers by organizational authorities have had

an "intense sense of wrongness or moral outrage" (Skarlicki and Kulik, 2004, p. 205), disengagement (Okimoto, 2009) and that the negative reactions of bystanders are significantly affected by others who also observed the mistreatment (Skarlicki and Kulik, 2004). In this way, bystanders have an impact on each other by discussing their experience, interpretation and judgment of the behaviors they have seen (DeGoey, 2000), thereby making a shared perception of supervisor CMS more likely.

Type of supervisor CMS climate and employee outcomes

CMS theory is dominated by the dual concern theory (Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Thomas, 1992) and the similar conflict management taxonomy (Blake and Mouton, 1964). These models suggest that there are a number of CMSs that individuals or groups may choose when responding to conflict: *Collaborating* (also known as problem solving or integrating), which occurs when a solution is sought by looking at the problem from both sides; *Yielding*, which occurs when one subordinates their wishes and desires to the other party; and *Forcing* (or contending), which occurs when one pushes their own needs and points of view at the expense of the other party. We propose that these CMSs that have commonly been studied at the individual level when a party has a conflict (i.e. collaborating, yielding, forcing) also can form the basis of the group's shared perception of their supervisor's third-party CMS.

While there have not been any cross-level studies assessing supervisor CMS climate and employee strain, Gelfand *et al.* (2012) assessed group-level effects, and found that a collaborative conflict culture within the team was positively associated with lower group-level burnout. Further, studies have found that individuals who self-reported that their workgroup typically used a collaborative or problem-solving CMS reported lower experience of bullying (Baillien and De Witte, 2009) and higher job satisfaction (Chen *et al.*, 2012). Based on the theoretical reasoning outlined in the previous section and these few group-level findings with group-level outcomes, we propose that:

H2. High supervisor collaborating climate will be associated with low anxiety/depression, bullying and claim thoughts.

It is acknowledged that there may be certain contexts that require a CMS of yielding or forcing (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001; Rahim, 1985), but these styles do not share the pervasive positive effects of a collaborating or problem-solving CMS in reducing employee strain (Weider-Hatfield and Hatfield, 1995, 1996). When supervisors use a yielding or forcing CMS, they can be perceived to demonstrate only a concern for self, or one team member, at the expense of other team members. In other words, for both of these styles, the team may perceive that the supervisor demonstrates a lack of concern for the team as a whole. A similar distinction in team conflict processes has been proposed by DeChurch *et al.* (2013), where "collectivist" team conflict processes show concern for others and for working with other team members to achieve team goals (e.g. collaborating) versus "individualistic" team conflict processes where the focus is on individual concerns and goals (e.g. yielding or forcing). Following this line of argument, it is proposed that:

H3. High supervisor yielding climate will be associated with high anxiety/depression, bullying and claim thoughts.

H4. High supervisor forcing climate will be associated with high anxiety/depression, bullying and claim thoughts.

Traditional CMS taxonomies have included an avoiding or withdrawing CMS, which has been generally associated with negative employee outcomes (DeChurch *et al.*, 2013). While the relationship between withdrawing and negative outcomes may occur when a party to the conflict has an avoiding CMS, it is argued that the items typically used to measure avoiding CMS (e.g. I try to make the problems seem less severe) do not capture the nature of "avoidance" when being considered from a third-party helper perspective. A supervisor may avoid confrontation between parties, while still actively dealing with the conflict, making this response very different to the passive nature of the "avoid" style at the individual level. In other words, when examining third-party CMS through the lens of traditional CMS taxonomies, "avoiding" may take on a more active and positive (i.e. visible confrontation minimization) complexion rather than a passive or negative complexion. As further development work on the "Avoid" scale as a third-party conflict handling style is recommended, this construct was not included in the current study.

Cross-level moderating effects of supervisor CMS climate

Research also has assessed leader characteristics that may moderate the negative consequences of conflict (Ayoko and Härtel, 2006; Way *et al.*, 2011). Findings are commonly explained using the stress-buffering hypothesis (Cohen and Edwards, 1989), in which certain work characteristics shield employees from experiencing negative outcomes associated with work stressors. Using an individual-level sample of Dutch insurance company employees, Römer *et al.* (2012) found supervisor third-party problem-solving behavior buffered the association between relationship conflict and employees' perceived conflict stress. Further, supervisor support has been found to be a cross-level moderator of the inter-personal conflict–organizational commitment relationship (J. L. Thomas *et al.*, 2005), and group-level relationship conflict has been found to interact with group-level empowering leadership to affect individual-level empowerment, commitment, innovation, teamwork and turnover (Chen *et al.*, 2011). In the current study, the effect described in the stress-buffering hypothesis is proposed to occur when positive supervisor CMS climates (i.e. high collaborating, low yielding, low forcing) reduce the positive association between relationship conflict and employee outcomes.

Further, the current study proposes exacerbating effects of negative supervisor CMS climates (i.e. low collaborating, high yielding, high forcing). We argue that these exacerbating effects occur as negative supervisor CMS climates are, in themselves, a work stressor. Therefore, while observation of relationship conflict may constitute exposure to one work stressor, embedding this relationship conflict within a negative supervisor CMS climate serves to heighten employee outcomes via increased risk to group norms, values and status, and a decreased sense of psychological safety. While this exacerbating hypothesis has not yet been applied to supervisor CMS climate, there have been individual-level studies, suggesting that employees who use a yielding CMS when they are a party to conflict exacerbate the positive relationship between inter-personal conflict and strain (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009), as does individual-level supervisor third-party forcing behavior (Römer *et al.*, 2012).

To investigate whether these buffering and exacerbating effects hold for a group-level treatment of CMS and when applied to supervisors as a third party, as theorized above, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5. High levels of collaborating (*H5a*); low levels of yielding (*H5b*); low levels of forcing (*H5c*) supervisor CMS climates (i.e. positive supervisor CMS climates) will buffer the positive association between relationship conflict and experiences of anxiety/depression, workplace bullying and claim thoughts.

H6. Low levels of collaborating (*H6a*); high levels of yielding (*H6b*); high levels of forcing (*H6c*) supervisor CMS climates (i.e. negative supervisor CMS climates) will exacerbate the positive association between relationship conflict and experiences of anxiety/depression, workplace bullying and claim thoughts.

Method

Procedure and participants

Participants were employees from a large Australian government department responsible for a range of services related to employment and workplace relations. Teams in this organization relied on their supervisor for resource allocation and goal-setting, but were predominantly semi-autonomous. Teams were interdependent in tasks such as providing programs, training and advice to businesses, conducting inspections, investigations and compliance activities at workplaces, providing legal services, customer service and corporate support services.

Questionnaires were hand-delivered to 1,033 employees across 21 regional areas representing 7 main service areas, with 562 questionnaires returned (response rate of 54 per cent). Supervisors were removed from the sample ($n = 73$), as were participants from groups in which less than three members returned a questionnaire ($n = 83$). Three multivariate outliers with a Mahalanobis distance greater than the critical cut-off point of chi square $p < 0.001$ also were removed. The final sample was 401 employees nested in 69 workgroups, with an average group size of 5.81 (SD = 3.12), ranging from 3 to 21 members per group.

The sample consisted of a diverse range of occupations, including labor inspectors (31.2 per cent); clerical/office support workers (24.1 per cent); policy officers (11.5 per cent); call center workers (8.0 per cent); social welfare and social marketing professionals (7.2 per cent); human resources and training professionals (5.2 per cent); program administrators (4.9 per cent); accountants (3.0 per cent); engineers, designers and electricians (1.7 per cent); information technology consultants (1.4 per cent); legal professionals (1.2 per cent); and other (0.6 per cent). The sample included 45.9 per cent males and 53.9 per cent females, with a mean age of 41.14 years (SD = 11.31), a mean tenure with the organization of 7.07 years (SD = 7.97), a mean tenure in current position of 3.96 years (SD = 5.47) and a mean tenure with current team of 2.38 years (SD = 3.17).

Measures

Where multi-item scales were used, each item was weighted according to its factor loading prior to being scaled and entered into the model. As factor weighted scales were used, the Hancock and Mueller (2001) coefficient H formula was used to calculate the reliability of each measure.

Relationship conflict: Relationship conflict was measured using Jehn's (1995) four-item scale (e.g. *Are there personality conflicts evident in your workgroup?*). Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always), and good scale reliability was found (H = 0.97).

Supervisor CMS climate: A total of 12 items from the Dutch test for conflict handling (De Dreu *et al.*, 2001) were used as the basis for scales assessing supervisor CMS climate. Items were adapted to reference the supervisor and their immediate workgroup. Example items included: *Supervisors usually deal with conflict in my workgroup by: working out a solution that serves both parties' interests as much as possible (collaborating); adapting to one party's goals and interests (yielding); pushing their own point of view (forcing).* Employees responded on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability analyses were conducted for each of the three conflict handling scales (i.e. three scales with four items in each scale) using data aggregated to the workgroup level. Good scale reliability was evident (supervisor collaborating climate H = 0.97; supervisor yielding climate H = 0.97; and supervisor forcing climate H = 0.98).

Correlations presented in Table I suggest that the three supervisor CMSs may not be separate constructs. Indeed, it could be argued that should a supervisor yield to one party in a discussion between two subordinates, other team members may perceive this behavior as forcing the other party. Previous studies, however, have shown that these CMS constructs are distinct (De Dreu *et al.*, 2001). Further, differential patterns of results were observed across each CMS construct, indicating discrimination in measurement. Nevertheless, to address these concerns, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted testing the fit of three models: a three-factor model (collaborating, forcing, yielding), a two-factor model (positive [collaborating] and negative [forcing, yielding]) and a one-factor model. This analysis confirmed that the three-factor model had the best fit (Table II) and that the change in chi square between the three-factor correlated model and the two-factor model was significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 254.12(2), p < 0.001$), as was the change in chi square between the three-factor model and the one-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 269.28(3), p < 0.001$).

Anxiety/depression: This aspect of psychological strain was measured with the GHQ-12 (Goldberg, 1972). An example item was "Over the past 4 weeks, how often have you felt you couldn't overcome your difficulties?" Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). While one-factor congeneric models were conducted on both the full GHQ-12 and on the four "anxiety/depression" items (Graetz, 1991), the four-item model had the best fit and reliability statistic ($\chi^2(1, N\ 401) = 1.44$, $p = 0.23$, TLI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.03, SRMR = 0.01, H = 0.82).

Bullying: As recommended for bounding responses when measuring the experience of bullying (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009), both a definition of bullying and a time referent were provided: *A person is subjected to* "bullying" *if they are subjected to repeated behaviors that a reasonable person would consider to be offensive, intimidating, humiliating or threatening.* Respondents were then asked if they had been subjected to bullying in the past month using a seven-point scale, 1 (never); 2 (rarely); 3 (once in a while); 4 (some of the time); 5 (fairly often); 6 (often); and 7 (almost daily). Bullying researchers use a range of time referents to bound responses when measuring exposure (e.g. during one's working life, within the past 12 months, 6 months or 1 month). We used a one-month

Table I.
Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations

Variable	M Individual level	M Group level	SD Individual level	SD Group level	ICC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Relationship conflict	**3.15**	3.17	**1.43**	0.78	0.16		−0.42**	0.46**	0.29**	0.38**	0.46**	0.48**
Supervisor collaborating climate	**4.47**	4.34	**1.27**	0.58	0.08	**−0.33****		−0.71**	−0.66**	−0.40**	−0.31**	−0.33**
Supervisor yielding climate	**3.45**	3.46	**1.42**	0.66	0.06	**0.38****	**−0.68****		0.71**	0.38**	0.34**	0.38**
Supervisor forcing climate	**3.73**	3.36	**1.39**	0.71	0.13	**0.32****	**−0.59****	**0.70****		0.47**	0.21**	0.27**
Anxiety/depression	**2.01**	3.09	**0.81**	0.55	0.07	**0.31****	**−0.29****	**0.29****	**0.36****		0.38**	0.34**
Bullying	**1.55**	1.55	**1.08**	0.47	0.03	**0.42****	**−0.32****	**0.37****	**0.31****	**0.36****		0.42**
Claims thoughts	**1.18**	1.18	**0.75**	0.34	0.06	**0.24****	**−0.16****	**0.24****	**0.18****	**0.13***	**0.34****	

Notes: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, data in bold typeface are individual-level data (N = 401). Data in non-bold typeface are group-level data (N = 69). Data presented utilize factor weighted scales; ICC = intra-class correlation

time referent to avoid delayed memory and recall effects, to provide a more conservative indication of exposure and to tap recent experiences of bullying.

Claim thoughts: A single item was constructed that asked employees to consider the past month, and indicate the extent to which they had seriously considered submitting a workers' compensation claim for a stress-related problem. The response option ranged from 1 (never) to 7 (very often).

Results

Data analysis overview

We assessed the need for control variables by analyzing the correlation between age, gender, years with organization, years in current role and years with current team and each of the dependent variables. As none of these were significant, they were not included in further modeling. As our model contains cross-level relationships, we used disaggregated modeling in Mplus Version 5.2. This method allows for variance decomposition so the within- and between-level variance can be modeled. A referent shift consensus model was used for data aggregation (D. Chan, 1998). The intra-class correlations (ICCs) for all focal variables are presented in Table I. In regard to the CMS climate variables, between workgroup variance was evident with ICC values of 8 per cent (collaborating), 6 per cent (yielding) and 13 per cent (forcing), which is acceptable (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). It is noted that relationship conflict also appeared to have group-level properties (16 per cent).

For *H1*, only within-level variance was considered. As *H2*, *H3* and *H4* involve group-level predictors, a random intercept model was used. *H5* and *H6* represent cross-level interactions, in which the group-level variable is predicted to moderate the individual-level relationships. Therefore, we used a random slopes (or slopes as outcomes) model for these hypotheses. To limit the number of variables and interactions tested in a single analysis, we assessed each of the cross-level interactions (i.e. Relationship Conflict × Supervisor CMS Climates) separately for each dependent variable. The simple slopes representing these cross-level interactions were calculated for low supervisor CMS climate (1 SD below mean) and high supervisor CMS climate (1 SD above mean), and were plotted using Preacher *et al.*'s (2004) online calculator (see also Preacher *et al.*, 2006).

Relationship conflict on employee outcomes

Main effects proposed in *H1* were supported, as employees who reported high levels of relationship conflict reported higher levels of anxiety/depression, $r(401) = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$; bullying, $r(401) = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$; and claims thoughts, $r(401) = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$. Given that there was between-level variance for relationship conflict, we also modeled the

Table II. Confirmatory factor analyses testing model fit for supervisor CMS climate

Model type	Chi square	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Three-factor model (collaborating, forcing, yielding)	x^2 (24, N = 69) = 36.55, $p < 0.05$	0.97	0.98	0.04	0.04
Two-factor model (positive [collaborating], negative [forcing, yielding])	x^2 (26, N = 69) = 290.67, $p < 0.001$	0.37	0.55	0.16	0.10
One-factor model	x^2 (27, N = 69) = 305.83, $p < 0.001$	0.36	0.52	0.16	0.15

effects of group-level relationship conflict on employee outcomes with no significant main effects found.

Supervisor CMS climate on employee outcomes

Main effects proposed in *H2* were supported, as workgroups with a high supervisor collaborating climate reported lower levels of anxiety/depression, $B = -0.26$, $p < 0.05$; bullying, $B = -0.17$, $p < 0.01$; and claims thoughts, $B = -0.10$, $p < 0.05$. *H3* and *H4* were partially supported. Supervisor yielding climate was positively related to bullying, $B = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$, and claims thoughts, $B = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$, but not significantly related to anxiety/depression. Supervisor forcing climate was positively related to anxiety/depression, $B = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$, and bullying, $B = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$, but not significantly related to claims thoughts.

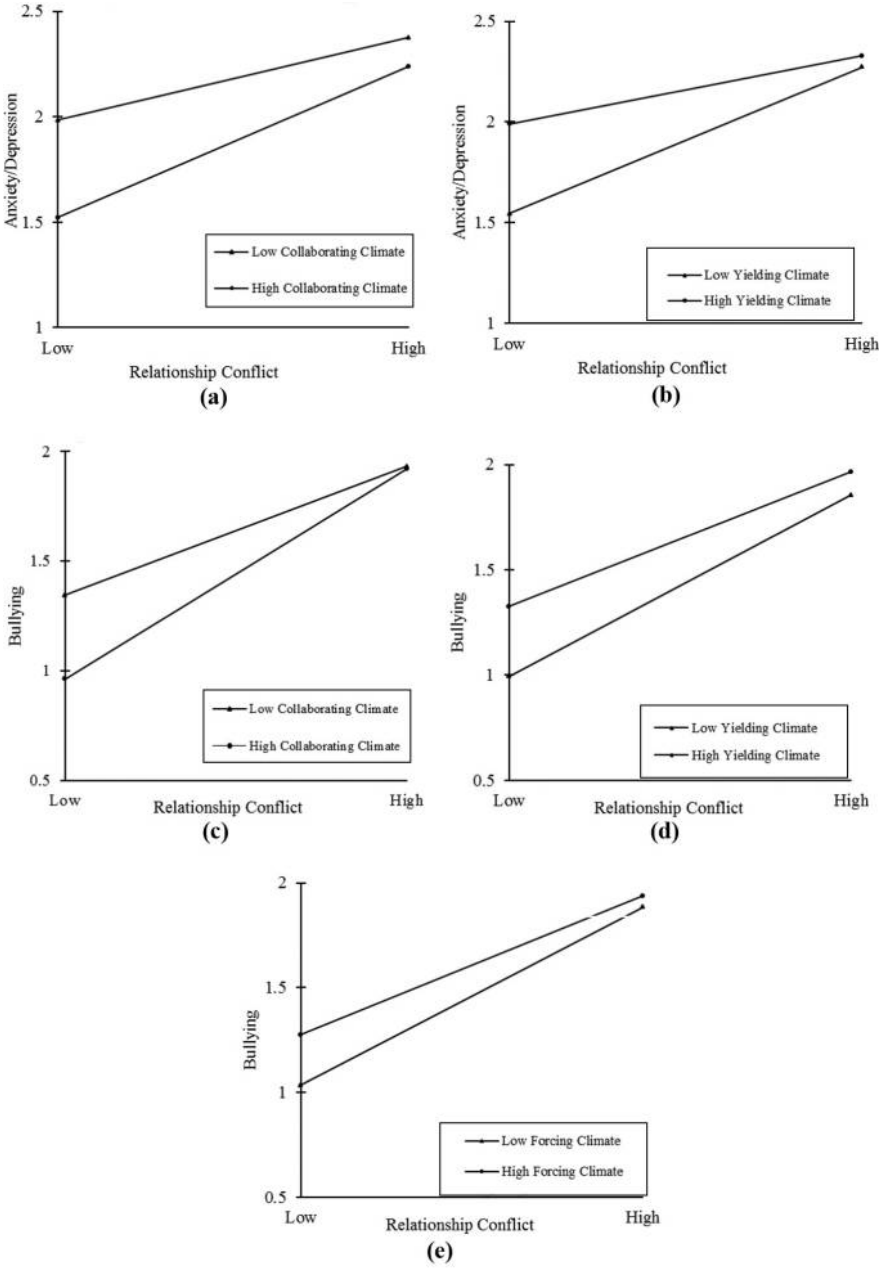
Cross-level moderating effects of supervisor CMS climate on employee outcomes

In relation to *H5* and *H6*, analyses revealed a significant cross-level Relationship Conflict × Supervisor Collaborating Climate interaction on anxiety/depression ($B = 0.10$, $p < 0.05$), bullying ($B = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$) and claims thoughts ($B = -0.07$, $p < 0.05$); a significant cross-level Relationship Conflict × Supervisor Yielding Climate interaction on anxiety/depression ($B = -0.10$, $p < 0.01$), bullying ($B = -0.06$, $p < 0.01$), and claims thoughts ($B = 0.09$, $p < 0.01$); and a significant cross-level Relationship Conflict × Supervisor Forcing Climate interaction on bullying ($B = -0.05$, $p < 0.05$) and claim thoughts ($B = 0.05$, $p < 0.05$).

Simple slopes. H5 predicted that the association between relationship conflict and anxiety/depression and bullying would be buffered in workgroups with high collaborating (*H5a*), low yielding (*H5b*) and low forcing (*H5c*) climates (i.e. positive supervisor CMS climates). Instead, the positive supervisor CMS climates were found to exacerbate the positive association between individual-level relationship conflict and anxiety/depression (high collaborating: $B = 0.25$, $z = 5.64$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(a)]; low yielding: $B = 0.26$, $z = 6.11$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(b)]); and between individual-level relationship conflict and bullying (high collaborating: $B = 0.34$, $z = 22.37$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(c)], low yielding: $B = 0.30$, $z = 13.78$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(d)]; low forcing: $B = 0.30$, $z = 14.16$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(e)]).

When considering the direction of moderation for the outcome variable of claim thoughts, a different pattern of findings from that found for anxiety/depression and bullying was evident. Supporting the notion of stress-buffering specified in *H5*, the positive association between relationship conflict and claim thoughts was indeed weaker or non-significant in workgroups with high collaborating ($B = 0.04$, $z = 1.54$, $p = 0.12$ [Figure 3(a)]), low yielding ($B = 0.03$, $z = 1.09$, $p = 0.28$ [Figure 3(b)]) and low forcing ($B = 0.06$, $z = 2.52$, $p = 0.01$ [Figure 3(c)]) climates.

H6 predicted that the association between relationship conflict and anxiety/depression and bullying would be exacerbated in workgroups with low collaborating (*H6a*), high yielding (*H6b*) and high forcing (*H6c*) climates (i.e. negative supervisor CMS climates). These hypotheses were supported for all outcome variables, including anxiety/depression (low collaborating: $B = 0.14$, $z = 3.01$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(a)]; high yielding: $B = 0.12$, $z = 2.84$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(b)]); bullying (low collaborating: $B = 0.21$, $z = 13.73$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(c)]; high yielding: $B = 0.22$, $z = 10.23$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(d)]; high forcing: $B = 0.23$, $z = 10.82$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 2(e)]); and



Notes: (a) and (b) Cross-level exacerbating effect of supervisor CMS climates on anxiety/depression; (c), (d) and (e) cross-level exacerbating effect of supervisor CMS climates on bullying

Figure 2.
Cross-level moderating effects of supervisor CMS climate on anxiety/depression and bullying

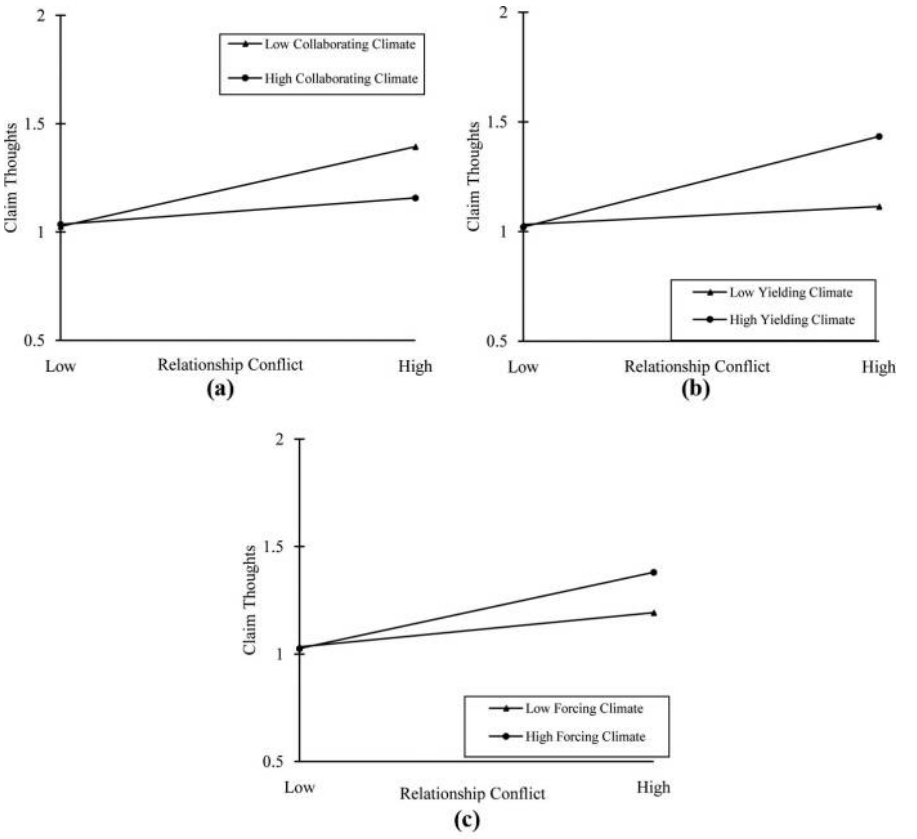


Figure 3.
Cross-level moderating effects of supervisor CMS climate on claim thoughts

Notes: (a); (b) and (c) Cross-level buffering effect of high collaborating, low yielding and low forcing climates (i.e. positive supervisor CMS climates) on claim thoughts

claim thoughts (low collaborating (B = 0.13, $z = 4.65$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 3(a)]), high yielding (B = 0.15, $z = 5.42$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 3(b)]) and high forcing climates (B = 0.12, $z = 5.60$, $p < 0.01$ [Figure 3(c)]).

Post hoc tests. Examination of the graphs indicate that at low relationship conflict, high collaborating and low yielding climates appear to be effective in anxiety/depression reduction, but at high relationship conflict, there is little discernible difference in these employee outcomes in a high versus low climate. To conduct a post hoc test of this interpretation, we ran the models with relationship conflict centered at 1 SD below the mean and 1 SD above the mean. There was significantly less experience of anxiety/depression at low relationship conflict when groups reported a high collaborating (B = −0.40, $p < 0.01$) or low yielding climates (B = 0.34, $p < 0.01$), whereas this difference in experience of employee outcomes at high versus low climates was not evident at high relationship conflict (collaborating climate: B = −0.12, $p = 0.33$; yielding climate: B = 0.04, $p = 0.73$). Similarly, there was significantly less experience of bullying at low relationship conflict when groups reported a high collaborating (B =

$-0.33, p < 0.01$), low yielding ($B = 0.25, p < 0.01$) or low forcing climates ($B = 0.18, p < 0.01$), and this difference in bullying at high versus low CMS climates was not evident at high relationship conflict (collaborating climate: $B = -0.01, p = 0.86$; yielding climate: $B = 0.08, p = 0.15$; forcing climate: $B = 0.04, p = 0.35$).

In contrast to the findings for anxiety/depression and bullying, it was at low relationship conflict, not high, that supervisor CMS had little differential effect on employee claims thoughts (collaborating climate: $B = 0.01, p = 1.00$; yielding climate: $B = 0.01, p = 1.00$; forcing climate: $B = 0.01, p = 1.00$). When relationship conflict was high, however, the climate represented by low collaborating, high yielding and high forcing was associated with a significantly higher incidence of claims thoughts (collaborating climate: $B = -0.20, p < 0.01$; yielding climate: $B = 0.24, p < 0.01$; forcing climate: $B = 0.13, p < 0.01$).

Discussion

This study found that employees who were exposed to relationship conflict had higher levels of anxiety/depression, bullying and serious thoughts of making a workers' compensation claim (*H1*). In addition, this study contributes to the occupational stress and conflict literature with findings of main and moderating effects of supervisor CMS climate on employee outcomes. Specifically, a negative main effect was found for supervisor collaborating climate on employee outcomes (*H2*). A positive main effect was found for both supervisor yielding climate (*H3*) and supervisor forcing climate (*H4*) on employee outcomes. These findings are broadly consistent with studies focusing on individuals in dyads who are in conflict either with another co-worker or their own supervisor, and highlight the important and far-reaching role of the supervisor when responding to conflict, including the effects on the broader team. Important implications for the span of influence of supervisor behavior on the workplace experience for employees have been indicated in these findings.

As an explanation for why these effects occurred, it is argued that the detrimental employee outcomes in workgroups with low collaborating, high yielding and high forcing climates may occur through a different mechanism to the detrimental effects found when individuals in dyads use low collaborating, high yielding or high forcing CMS during times of conflict. A supervisor, who typically responds as a third party by yielding to one party, by forcing an outcome or by not collaborating, may foster a sense of injustice in the workgroup through their placing a higher concern on an individual or themselves, rather than on the team as a whole. This interpretation also is consistent with the collectivist view of team conflict processes as proposed by DeChurch *et al.* (2013), which places greater concern on the workgroup than on the individual. For this reason, we suggest that organizational injustice may be a mechanism for why low collaborating, high yielding and high forcing climates are associated with negative employee outcomes, and should be an avenue for further research.

Cross-level moderating effects

The cross-level effects of supervisor CMS climates in the presence of low and high relationship conflict is an important finding, as it suggests that supervisor behaviors, represented as the shared perceptions of the team, moderate the effects of relationship conflict on anxiety/depression, bullying and claim thoughts. To tease out the divergent pattern of results we found for the outcome variables of anxiety/depression and bullying

on the one hand, versus claim thoughts on the other, we discuss these findings in separate sections below.

Anxiety/depression and bullying: Although we found support for the exacerbating effects of negative supervisor CMS climates (low collaborating, high yielding and high forcing), we found that positive supervisor CMS climates (high collaborating, low yielding and low forcing) also exacerbated the positive effects of relationship conflict on employee strain. Our unexpected stress-exacerbating effects for positive forms of supervisor CMS climates can be understood with reference to reverse-buffering effects. Reverse-buffering occurs when resources that are thought to be helpful in promoting well-being have a detrimental effect, rather than a positive one, by strengthening the stressor–strain relationship. Indeed, there have been multiple studies reporting that certain types of social support have this effect (Deelstra *et al.*, 2003; Kickul and Posig, 2001; Mayo *et al.*, 2012). These studies propose that the specific nature and types of support are important in determining a stress-buffering or reverse-buffering effect.

Post hoc tests conducted in our study found that the beneficial effects of high collaborating, low yielding and low forcing climates observed at low relationship conflict did not exist at high relationship conflict. These findings are consistent with conflict escalation theory which argues that collaborative or mediation type interventions have greater utility early in the conflict cycle, and are less effective when relationship conflict is high (Keashly and Nowell, 2010; Kozan *et al.*, 2014). An explanation for the different efficacy of supervisor CMS at low versus high relationship conflict also can be found in the work of Rubin (1980), who identified a number of common threads in the literature on third-party intervention in conflict. Specifically, Rubin suggested that certain third-party interventions that achieve effective resolution when the conflict is low may be less effective when the conflict is high in intensity. This notion can be applied specifically to the positive supervisor CMS of high collaborative climate where reduced efficacy at high conflict occurs because third-party interventions, such as new communication channels, encouraging broad consideration of problem sets and issue identification techniques, may work well when conflict is low, but not when conflict is high.

A second thread in the conflict literature identified by Rubin (1980, p. 385) that may explain why negative supervisor CMS climates of high yielding and high forcing have greater detrimental effects at low conflict, that is when conflict is low, parties have a general desire to resolve problems themselves, and may view high forcing and yielding third-party interventions as an "unwelcome and unwanted intrusion". When conflict is high, however, Rubin argues that the disputant's concerns switch to a desire to maintain entrenched positions and save face. These disputant positions at high relationship conflict may result in a desire for more definitive third-party interventions such as high forcing, where the supervisor can shoulder responsibility for decision-making in the conflict. Although social support from the supervisor was not directly measured, a finding relating to imposed versus requested support (Deelstra *et al.*, 2003) may be extrapolated to help understand our findings. These authors found negative physical and psychological reactions when social support was imposed rather than requested, and negative employee reactions were moderated by the extent to which they needed support. It was suggested that the imposition of support when there was either no problem, or a solvable problem, had detrimental effects on employee outcomes through

the sense of incompetence it creates, a sense that also may be evoked by high yielding and forcing climates when relationship conflict is low.

Claims thoughts: As predicted, high collaborating, low yielding and low forcing supervisor CMS climates (i.e. positive supervisor CMS climates) buffered the positive association between relationship conflict and claim thoughts, whereas, also as predicted, low collaborating, high yielding and high forcing supervisor CMS climates (i.e. negative supervisor CMS climates) exacerbated this association. By way of interpretation, it is suggested that when relationship conflict is high, positive supervisor CMS climates provide clear avenues for conflict handling and employee communication, thereby reducing claims thoughts. Negative supervisor CMS climates, on the other hand, may serve to close these avenues and drive a sense of interactional injustice, thereby further diminishing the likelihood of a constructive approach to conflict management (Giacomantonio *et al.*, 2011) and increasing claims thoughts. Further, it has been suggested that making a stress claim is a form of functional communication – an action that indicates dissatisfaction (Toohey, 1995). It also has been suggested that when supervisors, usually a source of social support, become instead a source of stress, employees do not have access to the usual organizationally sanctioned avenues for resolution (Dollard *et al.*, 1999). This may well be the case when supervisors engender high yielding or high forcing climates, thereby becoming a source of stress, removing functional conflict resolution options and driving employee thoughts of making a workers' compensation claim to seek resolution and voice dissatisfaction.

To help us understand these findings, there are a number of authors who have highlighted the importance of human resources (HR) practices (which supervisors enact) in reducing claims experience for organizations generally (Habeck *et al.*, 1991; Lewin and Schecter, 1991) and stress-related claims specifically (Moran *et al.*, 1995). Lewin and Schecter (1991) found four HR practices associated with claims frequency and duration. One of these was effective option for conflict resolution or a "mechanism for airing conflict openly". Similarly, Habeck *et al.* (1991) found that organizations in which management spent less time on employee communications, and had more controlling management styles, were associated with higher claims experience, the worst performers having at least 10 times as many claims as the best performers. Finally, Roberts and Markel (2001, p. 343) found that interactional justice was negatively associated with filing a claim, and theorized that this was based heavily on interactions with supervisors and, further, that there may be a retaliatory behavior where employees "keep a mental score of how fairly they are treated and use their own behavior to rebalance that score".

Limitations and future research

A research limitation is the reliance on cross-sectional, self-report data and the potential confounding effects of common method variance (CMV; Malhotra *et al.*, 2006; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Although the possible impact of CMV in the inflation or deflation of linear relationships is acknowledged, it has been argued that interaction effects are less susceptible to CMV in individual-level (Evans, 1985; Siemsen *et al.*, 2010) and cross-level interaction analyses (Lai *et al.*, 2013). Analysis of our data showed an absence of multicollinearity, as tolerance values were all greater than 0.01 (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007), no regular or persistent inflation of relationships and a wide range of correlations (ranging from 0.02 to 0.68). We also used a number of methodological controls to

minimize the potential effects of CMV as outlined by Podsakoff *et al.* (2012), such as the wording of items being diverse, the response scales being varied for predictor and criterion variables, and we separated the positioning of the predictor and criterion variables in the questionnaire.

In general, single-item measures have been suggested to have lower reliability and validity than scales with multiple items (Hair *et al.*, 1998), but these disadvantages are counterpointed by lower CMV effects, less redundancy in items and more positive experience of participants in filling in the questionnaire (Petrescu, 2013). Indeed, there is increasing recognition that short and single-item measures can have adequate reliability, and be psychometrically sound when measuring a homogeneous construct that is clearly defined (Bergkvist, 2014). Items used to measure exposure to bullying and claim thoughts in the current study meet these criteria of being homogeneous, one-dimensional and clearly defined. A single-item measure for self-labeling of exposure to bullying is the most common method of measuring bullying in the academic literature, and has also been reported to be a more conservative measure (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b).

Referent shift consensus composition models were used when aggregating individual-level data (Chan, 1998). Referent shift consensus models use measurement items that refer to higher group-level constructs (e.g. supervisors usually deal with relationship conflict in my workgroup by […]). However, future consideration of dispersion-composition models (Cole *et al.*, 2010), which consider the variability in within-group agreement rather than relying on group means, may allow for investigation of the main and moderating effects of CMS climate dispersion. Assessing dispersion of views of conflict and supervisor CMS also may allow identification of differential effects of conflict asymmetry (Jehn *et al.*, 2008; Karaca *et al.*, 2013; Rispens and Jehn, 2011), where there are two opposing perceptions of the severity of conflict within a group. Conflict asymmetry has been found to be negatively associated with work motivation and satisfaction, and positively associated with absenteeism in dyads (Jehn *et al.*, 2006) and with decreased performance and creativity in groups (Jehn *et al.*, 2010). Also, theoretical links have been made between conflict asymmetry and abusive supervision (Rispens *et al.*, 2010) which could be further explored.

The data, being cross-sectional in nature, place limitations on causation inferences in the relationships modeled. More complex research designs, such as within-groups designs, which model the relationships over time, would allow for further investigation of causative factors. Further research is recommended to determine the extent to which these main and moderating effects have long-term consequences for employee outcomes. Other within-person research designs, using experience sampling or diary studies, also could be conducted to better capture the dynamic nature (such as escalation) of workgroup relationship conflict.

One specific question arising that could be tested in the laboratory is the efficacy of positive supervisor CMS when it is imposed versus requested in high and low relationship conflict groups. Indeed, qualitative work by Römer *et al.* (2012a) suggests subordinates' expectations regarding supervisor third-party interventions exist, and that employees are unlikely to request supervisor help unless the conflict is difficult to solve, or has been occurring for some time. A study of this nature could be implemented in the laboratory, but would require more careful planning in the field and could perhaps be embedded in a supervisor training intervention. Thus, future field research could

make use of experimental intervention studies where supervisors are trained in positive third-party CMS, how to make them visible and when best to use them.

Practical implications that stem from this research are threefold. First, even when taking the moderating effects found in this study into account, it is clear that supervisors should aim to use high collaboration when dealing with conflict as a third party, rather than high yielding or high forcing, and to engender a positive CMS climate when conflict is low, when their intervention is likely to have the greatest chance of being influential for minimizing anxiety/depression and bullying. Supervisors also may benefit from understanding that while positive CMS climates have limited efficacy in reducing experience of anxiety/depression and bullying when relationship conflict is high, these positive CMS climates (high collaborating, low yielding and low forcing) can still have an impact on reduced claims thoughts at high relationship conflict. Second, supervisors who understand the broader effects of their CMS on their team may choose to make their positive CMS more visible, thereby influencing CMS climate. Third, when supervisors use positive CMS climates, in a visible way, an organizational cost benefit may be realized through reduced claims experience or a reduction in action-taking cognitions regarding making a workers' compensation claim for a stress-related illness.

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