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Handling conflict at work: The role of fit between subordinates' need for closure and supervisors' power tactics

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Handling conflict at work

The role of fit between subordinates' need for closure and supervisors' power tactics

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Abstract

Purpose – This research aims to explore the notion of fit between subordinates' need for cognitive closure and supervisors' power tactics on organizational conflict management.

Design/methodology/approach – Two-hundred and ninety employees drawn from six different Italian organizations were recruited for the purpose of this study.

Findings – Results indicated that high-need-for-closure subordinates utilized more constructive (solution-oriented) conflict management strategies when their supervisors relied on harsh power tactics, whereas low-need-for-closure subordinates were more inclined to use solution-oriented conflict management strategies when their supervisors relied on soft power tactics. Additionally, results indicated that, overall, supervisors' use of harsh power tactics increased subordinates reliance on maladapted (control-oriented) conflict management strategies, but even more so for subordinates with low need for cognitive closure.

Originality/value – This study highlights the importance of supervisor–subordinate fit to understand conflict management in organizational setting.

Keywords Power, Conflict management, Need for cognitive closure

Paper type Research paper

> It is not conflict of opinions that has made history so violent, but conflict of belief in opinions, that is to say conflict of convictions.
>
> – Friedrich Nietzsche

Getting along with colleagues at work is not easy. Organizational conflict arises from tension between co-workers because of real or perceived differences (De Dreu, Harinck, and Van Vianen, 1999; Wall and Callister, 1995) and constitutes an inevitable part of organizational culture (Putnam, 1988), consuming up to 20 per cent of managers' time (Thomas, 1992). At work, conflict usually revolves around relationships (e.g. personal taste, interpersonal style) or task issues (e.g. distribution of resources, procedures and policies; Amason and Schweiger, 1997; Cosier and Rose, 1977; Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954;

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Jehn, 1997; Kabanoff, 1991), and results from De Dreu and Weingart's (2003) meta-analysis suggest that "both are equally disruptive" (p. 746) with regard to organisational effectiveness.

Given its ramifications for organizations, conflict management has received much attention from a number of scholars and practitioneers (Gelfand *et al.*, 2012; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003; Rahim and Bonoma, 1979, Thomas and Kilmann, 1974). Indeed, several taxonomies have been developed to capture the plurality of behaviors workers use to deal with conflict. One of the first classifications on the topic was provided by Deutsch (1949) and was articulated around a cooperation–competition dichotomy. Other models differentiated conflict management styles in terms of concern for production and people (Blake and Mouton, 1964) or concern for self and for others (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979), whereas Putnam and Wilson (1982) distinguished between non-confrontation, control and solution-oriented strategies. Despite these different models, one criticism raised against this extensive body of knowledge is that much of the research on conflict management has focused on the consequences of using a given conflict management style on organizational outcomes without investigating why individuals select a given approach and what predisposes them to do so (for a discussion, see Nicotera *et al.*, 1995; Thomas and Kilmann, 1974; Rahim, 1983). Putnam and Poole (1987) have also reckoned that research has skirted how interpersonal interactions at work shape workers' conflict management styles and concluded that more work needs to be done to understand how these interactions produce shifts in conflict management styles (Nicotera, 1994).

In the present research, we address this issue by combining two separate approaches to social influence. One approach distinguishes between qualitatively distinct power tactics (French and Raven, 1959; Raven and Kruglanski, 1970) that supervisors may use to influence their employees. The second approach concerns employees' epistemic motivation and how likely they are of being affected by different influence attempts. The motivation of present interest is the need for cognitive closure (NfCC) (Kruglanski, 2004) whose role in forging socially shared realities has received considerable attention in recent years (for a review, see Kruglanski *et al.*, 2006). Together, these approaches suggest that workers' conflict management style is interactive and depends on the "fit" between employees and their supervisors.

In the following pages, we first briefly review several basic concepts of social power theory. We then carry out a similar review for the NfCC. Drawing on these notions, we then formulate our specific hypotheses and describe how we empirically scrutinized them.

Social power

In the past decades, supervisors' and subordinates' relations have been given significant attention through a burgeoning literature on social power (Abdalla, 1987; Hinkin and Schriesheim, 1990; Schwarzwald *et al.*, 2001; Yukl and Falbe, 1991). Social power has been defined as the ability to affect other's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Raven, 2001, 2004). An influential framework for understanding social power is the *interpersonal power interaction model* (IPIM; Raven *et al.*, 1998; Raven, 2008). The IPIM taxonomy contains 11 power tactics that leaders utilize to persuade their subordinates, namely, *expert*, *informational* and *referent power*; legitimacy of *dependence*; *reciprocity*, *position* and *equity*; and, lastly, *personal* vs *impersonal coercion* and *reward*. These are described in turn:

- *Expert power* is based on people's belief that one is knowledgeable in a given domain. Rather than reflecting genuine erudition, it is the perception of expertise that provides one with power. For instance, because doctors are generally perceived as experts in their field, a doctor's diagnosis would be able to influence his or her patient's behavior and attitude even if the diagnosis is in fact inaccurate.
- *Informational power*, in contrast to *Expert power*, relates to the ability of utilizing information to provide logical arguments to persuade others. As Koslowsky and Schwarzwald (2001) have aptly noted, expert and informational power bases reflect the classical distinction between central and peripheral routes of persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), respectively.
- *Referent power* is based on the ability of being liked, respected and admired by others. For example, referent power is gained when subordinates identify and consider their supervisor as a role model because of their personal admiration for that person.
- *Legitimacy of dependence* is derived from the social responsibility norm which commands compliance to requests being made from someone in need of assistance.
- *Reciprocity* power is based on the social norm of reciprocating with others (tit-for-tat).
- *Legitimacy of position* is power gained from being in a higher position in the social hierarchy (either formal or informal).
- Legitimacy based on the *equity* norm is another form of power, which compels one to obey someone in an organization who suffered a lot, worked hard or has been harmed in some ways.

Finally, the IPIM model includes four other types of power, namely, *coercion* and *reward* that are either *personal* or *impersonal*. Personal coercion and reward are at play when subordinates believe that compliance will result in being personally liked or disliked by the person in power (e.g. supervisor). On the other hand, impersonal coercion and reward refers to threats of punishment or promises of reward based on compliance (e.g. promotions or demotions).

While the 11 power tactics described by the IPIM have been useful to investigate the notion of power in organizational setting, research has evinced that these power strategies can be clustered into *harsh* and *soft* power tactics (Raven *et al.*, 1998; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 1999) depending on the amount of autonomy they afford subordinates in choosing to comply or not (Pierro *et al.*, 2004).

Soft power tactics provide greater freedom of choice because they are not associated with enforceable rules that dictate the dispensation of rewards and punishments (Raven *et al.*, 1998). In relation to this aspect, the soft power category includes power tactics such as expert, referent, informational power and legitimacy of dependence. In contrast, harsh power tactics pressure compliance with enforceable rules (or norms), coupled with either positive or negative consequences (Pierro *et al.*, 2012; Raven *et al.*, 1998). Consequently, power tactics such as personal and impersonal coercion and reward, legitimacy of position, equity and reciprocity have been classified in the harsh power tactics category.

The IPIM specifies several factors that influence power figures' selection of power tactics and subordinates' likelihood of compliance to them. These include situational factors such as social norms, aspects of the work setting, organizational culture and organizational position (for a review, see Koslowsky and Schwarzwald, 2001; Schwarzwald *et al.*, 2004), as well as personality-level factors such as self-esteem, need for power, desire for control and self-presentation style (for a review see Raven, 2004; Pierro *et al.*, 2008). Implicit in the power relations dynamics addressed in the IPIM is the notion of "fit" between the type of power strategy selected by supervisors and the personality and motivational characteristics of employees. For instance, in commenting on the choice of power tactics, Raven (2001, p. 223) stated explicitly that "[…] the agent will be guided by […] an assessment of the target of influence".

The notion of "fit" implicit in the IPIM is part and parcel of the general person–environment approach (French *et al.*, 1982; Caplan and Harrison, 1993) often adopted in the organizational literature (for a recent meta-analytic review, see Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). Its general logic is that the efficacy of psychological processes or the likelihood of psychologically desirable outcomes depends on the degree of correspondence between the psychological situation in which an individual is embedded and his/her capabilities, values or motivational orientations. In line with this theoretical framework, the present research explores the effect of fit between supervisors' power tactics and subordinates' NfCC on subordinates' conflict management styles. Before articulating our specific hypotheses in this regard, we introduce the construct of need for closure (NFC) and discuss its relevance to the topic of social power.

Need for cognitive closure

The NFC is defined as a "desire for a firm answer to a question, any firm answer as compared to confusion and/or ambiguity" (Kruglanski, 2004, p. 6). It is an epistemic motivation which affects how individuals process information and render judgments (Kruglanski, 1989, 2004; Kruglanski *et al.*, 2006)[1]. Specifically, people with a strong NFC tend to "seize" on information, permitting a judgment on a topic of interest (as long as information is perceived as subjectively valid), and to "freeze" upon such judgment, becoming relatively "closed minded" to further relevant information (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996). Consequently, under a strong NfCC, individuals tend to make strong judgmental commitments and become relatively unshaken in their views. In contrast, individuals with a strong need to avoid closure are leery of judgmental commitments: they feel more comfortable keeping their options open and eschew binding views or definite opinions.

An individual's standing on the NFC continuum is determined by the perceived benefits and costs of possessing versus lacking closure. Such costs and benefits can be made salient by several contextual features (for example, time pressure, boredom, noise, fatigue; see for reviews, Kruglanski, 2004). Besides its various situational determinants, the NFC may also vary stably across individuals. A scale, which has been translated into several languages, was developed to tap peoples' dispositional NFC (Webster and Kruglanski, 1994), enabling cross-cultural investigations of various NFC effects (for reviews, see Kruglanski, 2004; Richter and Kruglanski, 2003; Mannetti *et al.*, 2002). Results obtained with the Need-for-Closure Scale have typically replicated those obtained with various situational inductions of this motivation, providing convergent evidence for the construct validity of NFC.

Prior research has shown that NFC affects a variety of intrapersonal, interpersonal and group phenomena (see Kruglanski, 2004 for a review). Because it fosters a desire for firm knowledge (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996), the NFC induces a quest for consensus and of shared reality among group members (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2006). Accordingly, it was found that groups composed of dispositionally high-(*vs* low)need-for-closure members both exerted and experienced greater uniformity pressures (De Grada *et al.*, 1999), reported stronger desire to agree with other group members (Kruglanski *et al.*, 1993) and exhibited a tendency to reject opinion deviates (Kruglanski and Webster, 1991). Furthermore, high-(*vs* low)need-for-closure individuals exhibited attraction to groups as function of the degree to which their membership was perceived as homogeneous, hence promising the affordance of a coherent social reality (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2002).

Consistent with these findings, NFC is correlated with political conservatism (Jost *et al.*, 2003) and preserving group norms across varying generations of membership (Livi *et al.*, 2007). In organizational contexts, supervisors with a high (*vs* low) NfCC tend to exhibit a preference for harsh (*vs* soft) power tactics because they promote the formation of consensus and thus cognitive closure (Pierro *et al.*, 2012). In summary, considerable evidence supports the notion that a heightened NfCC promotes the rapid formation of shared social realities (reflecting "seizing") and the tendency to preserve such realities across varying conditions ("freezing").

Conflict management style with the supervisor

Over the years, different taxonomies of conflict management styles have been developed, usually distinguishing between two to five different styles (Rahim and Magner, 1995). The present research was conducted using Putnam and Wilson's (1982) taxonomy which distinguishes between three conflict management strategies, namely, non-confrontation strategies, control strategies and solution-oriented strategies. *Non-confrontation strategies* are considered maladaptive because they usually involve avoiding disagreements, downplaying controversies or approaching conflict indirectly; they are a combination of what Blake and Mouton (1964) would call "avoidant" and "smoothing" styles, representing movement away from opposition. *Control strategies*, also considered maladaptive, involve managing conflict by arguing persistently for one's positions and using non-verbal messages to emphasize one's demands. This style is often referred to as "dominating", "competing", "contending", "win-lose" or "zero-sum", representing movement against the opposition. *Solution-oriented strategies* are a combination of what has been referred to as "compromising", "collaborating" or "integrating", representing movement toward the opposition, and thus conceived as adapted conflict-management strategies.

The present research

According to the *interpersonal power interaction model*, soft power tactics provide subordinates with greater autonomy, and are less controlling than harsh power tactics (Raven *et al.*, 1998). In other words, because soft power tactics (*vs* harsh power tactics) provide choice and opportunities for initiative, they encourage deliberations and delay the formation of consensus (Pierro *et al.*, 2012). It follows that low-(*vs* high)need-for-closure subordinates should prefer soft power tactics because they eschew firm decisions and prefer to entertain different options. Conversely, high-(*vs*

low)-need-for-closure subordinates should prefer harsh power tactics because their aversion for uncertainty should make them more comfortable in a work setting where the supervisor's word is law and his/her directives are unquestioned (Pierro *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, when there is a fit between subordinates' NFC and supervisors' power tactics (soft or harsh), supervisor–surbordinates' interactions should be more harmonious which could be observable in terms of more adaptive conflict management strategies. Conversely, misfit between a supervisor' power tactics and his/her subordinates NfCC should lead to less harmonious interpersonal interactions and thus foster less adaptive conflict management strategies. Specifically, the present research examined the following hypotheses:

H1. Fit between subordinates' need for cognitive closure and supervisors' power tactics promotes subordinates' use of solution-oriented strategies.

H2. Fit between subordinates' need for cognitive closure and supervisors' power tactics reduces subordinates' use of control strategies.

Additionally, given that confrontation reflects the absence of consensus and clear guidance, we hypothesized that:

H3. Subordinates' need for cognitive closure is positively related to the use of non-confrontational strategies.

Finally, because harsh power tactics reduce deliberation and accelerate the formation of consensus (Pierro *et al.*, 2012), we hypothesized that:

H4. Subordinates experiencing harsh power tactics from their supervisors are more inclined to use non-confrontational conflict management strategies.

Method

Participants

Two-hundred and ninety employees (174 men and 116 women) drawn from six Italian organizations (a textile industry [51], a building trade [48], a public hospital [52], a computer firm [23], a service company [77] and a social cooperative [39]) participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Their mean age was 38.85 years (SD = 10.04). There were no gender or age effect; therefore, they are not discussed further.

Procedure

Employees filled out the Need-for-Cognitive-Closure Scale followed by a measure of Power Tactics and a measure of conflict management styles that they use in relations with their supervisors. The questionnaire packet included an introductory letter in which the purpose of the study was explained. Employees were told that the study would examine the relations between supervisors and workers in work conflict situations and that their responses would be kept confidential.

Need for cognitive closure. Participants responded to the Italian version of the Revised Need for Closure Scale (Rev. NfCS, Pierro and Kruglanski, 2005). This scale constitutes a brief 14-item self-report instrument designed to assess stable individual differences in the NfCC (e.g. "Any solution to a problem is better than remaining in a state of uncertainty"). Participants responded to these items on 6-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). A composite NFC score was computed by averaging all responses. Previous studies (Pierro and Kruglanski, 2005)

have demonstrated that the revised version of NfCS has a nomological validity (the disattenuated correlations between Rev. NfCS and old NfCS in the USA and Italian samples are 0.92 and 0.93, respectively) and satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = 0.80$ in the USA sample, and $\alpha = 0.79$ in the Italian sample). In the present sample, reliability of the Rev. NfCS was satisfactory as well ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Supervisors' use of power tactics as perceived by subordinates. To examine supervisors' use of power tactics as perceived by their subordinates, we asked employees to respond to the Italian version (Pierro *et al.*, 2012) of the Interpersonal Power Inventory (IPI) (Raven *et al.*, 1998) Worker's Format, developed by Schwarzwald *et al.* (2004). The IPI involves the following scenario:

> Often supervisors ask subordinates to do their job somewhat differently. Sometimes subordinates resist doing so or do not follow the supervisor's directions exactly. Other times, they will do exactly as their supervisor requests. We are interested in examining what behaviors supervisors use for gaining compliance.

Then participants were presented with 33 statements (e.g. "My supervisor reminds me that he/she could help me receive special benefits if I comply"), representing the 11 tactics delineated in the IPIM (three items for each tactic). Eleven representative items are presented in the Appendix (one for each power tactic). Respondents were then asked to indicate, for each statement, how often his/her supervisor uses this tactic at work. Responses on the Likert scale ranged from 1 (*Very rarely) to* 7 (*Very often*).

In line with prior research, we classified the 11 power tactics into harsh (impersonal and personal reward and coercion, legitimacy of position, equity and reciprocity) and soft (information, expertise, reference and legitimacy of dependence) power tactics categories. Internal consistency scores for harsh ($\alpha = 90$) and soft ($\alpha = 0.77$) power tactics were satisfactory.

Conflict management style with the supervisor. To measure conflict management strategies, participants responded to the Italian version (Pierro, 2004) of the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument developed by Putnam and Wilson (1982; Wilson and Waltman, 1988). This instrument contains 30 items designed to measure three conflict management strategies used by subordinates with their supervisor:

(1) non-confrontation strategies (12 items, e.g. "I shy away from topics that are sources of disputes"; "I reduce disagreements by making them seem insignificant");

(2) control strategies (7 items, e.g. "I assert my opinion forcefully"; "I argue insistently for my stance"); and

(3) solution-oriented strategies (11 items, e.g. "I try to use my supervisor's ideas to generate solutions to problems"; "I offer trade-offs to reach solutions to a disagreement").

Participants were asked to think of disagreements they have encountered with their immediate supervisor and indicate how frequently they engaged in each of the described conflict management strategies. Participants responded on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Always*). Reliability for non-confrontation ($\alpha = 0.83$), control ($\alpha = 0.76$) and solution-oriented ($\alpha = 0.72$) strategies were satisfactory.

Results

Convergent and discriminant validity of the measures

To assess the convergent and discriminant validity of IPI, Conflict Management Styles and Need for Closure measures we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with six (correlated) latent factors (*harsh and soft power tactics*, *non-confrontation strategies, control strategies, solution-oriented strategies, and* NFC). The observed variables contained in the CFA model were represented by the 11 power tactics (seven harsh and four soft power tactics) and, specifying the model as partial disaggregation model (Bagozzi and Heatherton, 1994) and using the *split-half* procedure, by two aggregates of items for each of the remaining constructs (i.e. *non-confrontation strategies, control strategies, solution-oriented strategies and* NFC*)*. To further proving discriminant validity of the constructs, we compared the estimated six-factor model with three alternative models: one with five latent factors (*one latent factor – Power – underlying the 11 power tactics*, *non-confrontation strategies, control strategies, solution-oriented strategies and* NFC*); one with four latent factors* (*harsh and soft power tactics*, *one latent factor underlying Conflict management styles and Need for closure*); one with one latent factor (assuming a "general factor" underlying all the observed variables). CFA results show that the six-factor model ($\chi^2(137, N = 290) = 557.16, p = 0.00$; CFI = 0.89; RMSEA = 0.10; SRMR = 0.08) fits the data better compared to the five-factor model (χ^2 (142, $N = 290$) = 617.89, $p = 0.00$; CFI = 0.87; RMSEA = 0.12; SRMR = 0.08), the four-factor model ($\chi^2(146, N = 290) = 924.01, p = 0.00$; CFI = 0.79; RMSEA = 0.14; SRMR = 0.12) and, finally, the one-factor model ($\chi^2(152, N = 290) = 1{,}344.89, p = 0.00$; CFI = 0.68; RMSEA = 0.17; SRMR = 0.13). The increase in fit of the six-factor over the five-factor model ($\Delta c^2(5) = 60.73, p < 0.001$), the four-factor model ($\Delta c^2(9) = 366.85, p < 0.001$) and the one-factor model (Δc^2 (15) = 787.73, $p < 0.001$) were all significant, thus supporting the distinction between the six constructs. In addition, these results demonstrate that the probability of common method variance occurring is minimized (i.e. inflating the relationship between constructs) (Iverson and Maguire, 2000; Podsakoff and Organ, 1986; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). This is affirmed by the better fit of the competing models as they increased in complexity (Iverson, 1996; Korsgaard and Roberson, 1995, McFarland and Sweeney, 1992). Finally, the factor loading values of the six-factor model were all significant and above 0.53, thus demonstrating convergent validity for the constructs with multiple indicators (Bagozzi, 1994).

Main analyses

A *within-subjects* ANOVA, with power tactics as repeated measure, yielded a significant effect ($F(1, 289) = 303.64$; $p < 0.001$). Results indicated that participants generally described their supervisors as more inclined to use soft ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.98$) than harsh power tactics ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.99$). These results replicate prior research (Raven *et al.*, 1998; Pierro *et al.*, 2004, 2012). A separate *within-subjects* ANOVA, with conflict management strategies as repeated measure, indicated that our participants generally preferred solution-oriented strategies ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.71$) over both control ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.02$) and non-confrontation strategies ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.85$; $F(2, 578) = 31.91$; $p < 0.001$). A summary of the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between the variables are given in Table I.

As can be seen in the table, we obtained a positive correlation between supervisors' use of harsh and soft power tactics ($r = 0.59$; $p < 0.001$). This relatively high correlation is likely

given that both variables are power tactics (Pierro *et al.*, 2012). The three conflict management strategies were intercorrelated (non-confrontation and control $r = -0.18$, $p < 0.005$; non-confrontation and solution $r = 0.19$, $p < 0.005$; control and solution $r = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, NfCC was positively correlated with harsh ($r = 0.25$; $p < 0.001$) and soft ($r = 0.16$; $p < 0.01$) power tactics and with non-confrontation conflict management styles ($r = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$). Harsh tactics were positively related to employees' non-confrontation ($r = 0.28$; $p < 0.001$) and control ($r = 0.15$; $p < 0.05$) conflict management styles, whereas soft tactics were positively related to employees' non-confrontation ($r = 0.23$; $p < 0.001$) and solution ($r = 0.20$; $p < 0.001$) conflict management styles.

The next analysis examined the predicted "fit" effect consisting of the interaction between subordinates' NFC and supervisors' power tactics on subordinates' conflict management styles. These predictions were tested with three separate multiple regression analyses using the product variable approach suggested by Baron and Kenny, 1986).

In each of the three multiple regression analyses, we entered NFC (A), harsh (B) and soft (C) power tactics and the interactions between NFC and these power tactics (i.e. A × B, A × C). Following Aiken and West (1991), predictor variables (i.e. NFC and power tactics) were grand mean centered (i.e. by subtracting the mean from each score). The interaction terms were based on these centered scores. For each conflict strategy, we also entered the two alternative conflict management strategies as control variables. Results of these analyses are summarized in Table II.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
NFC	3.59	0.68	(0.75)					
Harsh tactics	2.55	0.99	0.25***	(0.90)				
Soft tactics	3.46	0.98	0.16**	0.59***	(0.77)			
Non-confrontation	3.61	0.85	0.29***	0.28***	0.23***	(0.83)		
Control	3.76	1.02	0.06	0.15*	−0.03	−0.18**	(0.76)	
Solution	4.15	0.71	0.01	0.09	0.20***	0.19**	0.33***	(0.72)

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; Cronbach's alphas in bracket

Table I. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables

Criteria predictors	Non-confrontation Beta	Control Beta	Solution Beta
NFC	0.26***	0.10	−0.08
Harsh tactics	0.24***	0.35***	−0.23***
Soft tactics	−0.02	−0.26***	0.29***
NFC × Harsh	0.01	−0.13*	0.24***
NFC × Soft	0.03	0.10	−0.22***
Control variables			
Non-confrontation	–	−0.32***	0.27***
Control	−0.32***	–	0.43***
Solution	0.28***	0.44***	–

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table II. Results summary of moderated multiple regression analyses

For non-confrontation strategies (controlling for control and solution-oriented strategies), results indicated a significant effect of subordinates' NFC ($\beta = 0.26$; $p < 0.001$) and supervisor's harsh power tactics ($\beta = 0.24$; $p < 0.001$).

For control strategies (controlling for non-confrontation and solution-oriented strategies), we found a positive effect of harsh tactics ($\beta = 0.35$; $p < 0.001$) and a negative effect of soft tactics ($\beta = -0.26$; $p < 0.001$). Of greater importance, the interaction between NFC and harsh tactics was significant ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < 0.05$). To further analyze the interaction effect, we conducted simple slopes analyses (Aiken and West, 1991). Results indicated that the relation between harsh tactics and control strategies was positive when the NFC was low (1 SD below the mean), $\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$. This relation, even though significant, was much less pronounced when the NFC was high (1 SD above the mean), $\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.05$. The findings are displayed in Figure 1.

Finally, for solution-oriented strategies (controlling for non-confrontation and control and strategies), we found a negative effect of harsh tactics ($\beta = -0.23$; $p < 0.001$) and a positive effect of soft tactics ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$). The interaction between NFC and harsh tactics was significant for solution strategies ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) and the interaction between NFC and soft tactics was significant for solution strategies ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.001$).

Regarding the former interaction effect (NFC × harsh tactics), results of simple slopes analysis demonstrated that the relation between harsh tactics and solution strategies was positive when NFC was high (1 SD above the mean), $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$; however, this relation became negative when NFC was low (1 SD below the mean), $\beta = -0.35$, $p < 0.01$. The findings are illustrated in Figure 2.

Regarding the latter interaction effect (NFC × soft tactics), simple slopes analysis indicated that the relation between soft tactics and solution strategies was positive when NFC was low (1 SD below the mean) ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$) and became non-significant when NFC was high (1 SD above the mean) ($\beta = 0.01$, $p = 0.93$). These findings are illustrated in Figure 3.

Discussion

The present results demonstrate the influence of subordinates' NfCC and supervisors' power tactics on subordinates' conflict management styles at work. Results indicated that these two factors were both positively related to the use of non-confrontation

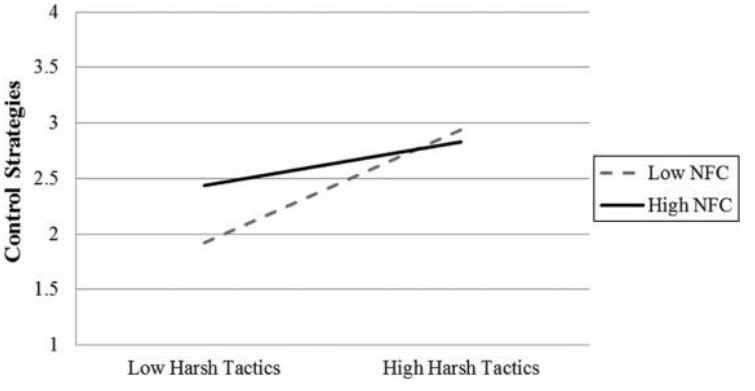

Figure 1.
Subordinates' use of control strategies as a function of their NfCC and their supervisors' tendency to use harsh power tactics

strategies, thus supporting *H3* and *H4*. Given that confrontation reflects the absence of consensus and clear guidance, these results are consistent with our theoretical framework which proposes that NFC is a motivation related to abhorring uncertainty (Kruglanski, 2004), whereas harsh power tactics reduce deliberation and accelerate the formation of consensus (Pierro *et al.*, 2012).

Results also supported the notion that subordinates' conflict management style is influenced by the fit between their NFC and their supervisors' use of power tactics. Specifically, the study found that in situations of conflict with their supervisors, high-NFC subordinates tend to prefer more constructive (solution-oriented) conflict management strategies when their supervisors use harsh power tactics, and refrain from using (i.e. control) conflict management strategies when their supervisors use soft power tactics. In contrast, low-NFC subordinates were more inclined to use solution-oriented conflict management strategies when their supervisors rely on soft power tactics and less so when their supervisors rely on the harsh power tactics. They were also more inclined to rely on control conflict management strategies when facing harsh power tactics from their supervisors. Overall, these results supported *H1* and *H2*.

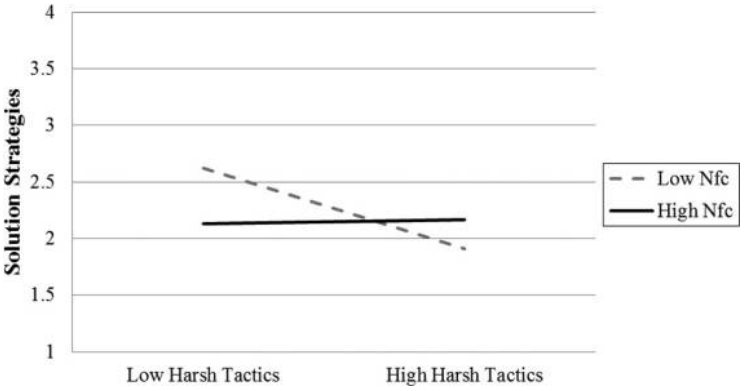

Figure 2.
Subordinates' use of solution strategies as a function of their NfCC and their supervisors' tendency to use harsh power tactics

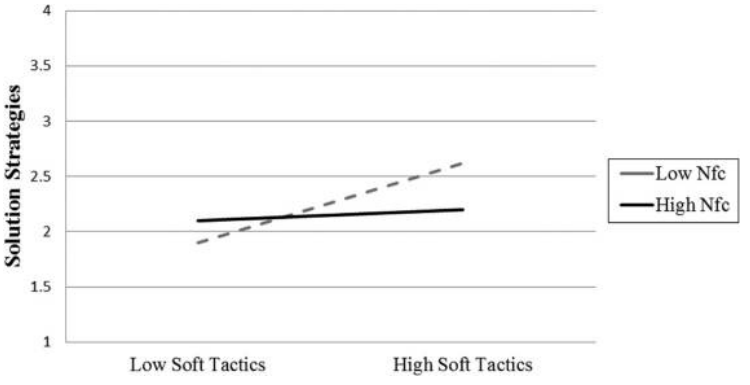

Figure 3.
Subordinates' use of solution strategies as a function of their NfCC and their supervisors' tendency to use soft power tactics

Limitations

Some limitations of this research should be acknowledged. For example, the reliance on correlational data prevents us from making causal inferences. Indeed, because work is such an important part of people's lives, one could reasonably argue that supervisors' power tactics may eventually shape subordinates' NfCC. One way of testing for this possibility would be to examine the influence of power tactics on subordinates' NFC using a longitudinal design. Alternatively, subordinates' NfCC could be experimentally manipulated to increase the internal validity of the present findings. For instance, individuals' conflict management styles could be observed after their NfCC has been augmented (e.g. via time pressure) and after experiencing soft or harsh power tactics from an authority figure.

Additionally, given that our data were obtained only from the perspective of subordinates, the present research is not impervious to the potential problem of common method variance. However, given the complex interactions described earlier, it is unlikely that our results can be explained by systematic measurement error. Nonetheless, to avoid this methodological shortcoming, future research could directly survey supervisors and their use of power tactics.

Implications

Despite these methodological limitations, this research addresses an important gap in the present conflict management literature (for a discussion see Nicotera *et al.*, 1995) by investigating the interpersonal dynamics that influence workers' conflict management style. Although prior research has emphasized the consequences attached to using different conflict management strategies, the present research makes a contribution by highlighting personal and environmental factors that predispose employees to select them. Consequently, the present research offers several implications for management and interesting avenues for human resources. One of them involves the pairing of supervisors and subordinates based on supervisors' power tactics and subordinates' NFC. Indeed, work groups could be created in the optic of fostering adaptive conflict management strategies. For instance, a supervisor with the habit of using soft power tactics could be paired with subordinates with low NfCC, a situation which could promote solution-oriented conflict management strategies. Over time, a situation such as this one could be favorable to a positive work climate; a pivotal determinant of organizational success (Ostroff *et al.*, 2003). In contrast, pairing supervisors that favor harsh power tactics with subordinates with low NfCC may create a toxic environment characterized by an organizational culture of conflict detrimental to organizational effectiveness.

Moreover, given that mounting evidence supports the idea that people's NfCC can fluctuate across situations (e.g. in noisy environments, stress and fatigue; for a review see Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski *et al.*, 1993; Webster, 1993), the current findings also prescribe that supervisors undertake a flexible and vigilant approach with their subordinates. Specifically, supervisors should:

- recognize the instances (i.e. with the help of appropriate training) that affect their subordinates' NFC; and
- adjust their power tactics to create a situation of fit with their subordinates.

Overall then, this analysis suggests a managerial approach that makes decision based on the interdependence between supervisors and subordinates.

Future research

This work also opens the gate for many avenues of potentially fruitful future research.

One such research pertains to the traditional distinction between relationship and task-related conflicts (Amason, 1996; De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997; Jehn, 1995; Simons and Peterson, 2000). Although prior research has shown that relationship- and task-related conflicts are equivalently detrimental to organizational performance, evidence also points to the possibility that both can have distinct consequences on organizational outcomes (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). For instance, relationship conflicts usually create greater team member dissatisfaction than task-related conflicts (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). Future research could examine whether the qualitative nature of subordinate–supervisor conflicts influences subordinates' selection of conflict management strategies. Indeed, it could be that, despite a situation of subordinate–supervisor fit, relationship-conflicts are too ego-threatening and laborious to deal with and thus foster maladapted conflict management strategies, whereas task-related conflicts are more dispassionate and thus facilitate conflict resolution. These boundary conditions could be mediated by the energetic demands of conflicts, an idea that could be tested by measuring employees' vitality or the extent to which they are ego-depleted (Baumeister *et al.*, 2007; Muraven and Baumeister, 2000). If it is true that relationship-conflicts are more taxing than task-related ones, then the energy at the individual's disposal could affect the type of conflict management strategies selected (for a discussion see Kruglanski *et al.*, 2012). This appears likely, given that solution-oriented strategies relying on recognizing and incorporating innovatively multiple points of view are conceivably more energy demanding than controlling strategies centered on imposing one's personal opinion.

Finally, one fundamental question raised by the following research concerns the mechanism at play between supervisor–subordinates' fit and conflict management strategies. Effort in finding the underlying mechanism(s) could provide important insights for person–environment fit theory. Several possible mechanisms could be investigated including:

- greater positive and lesser negative affect;
- greater interpersonal bond, trust and perception of similarity;
- effectiveness of communication processes (encoding, transmission of information); and
- receptiveness to feedback (less ego-defensiveness).

These could be profitably probed in future research.

Conclusion

Organizational conflict is a common phenomenon that needs to be dealt with swiftly to minimize its detrimental consequences on organizational climate and performance. The current research demonstrates the importance of fit between supervisors and subordinates to create conditions conducive to a more harmonious work environment.

Specifically, research described here supports the idea that when supervisors' power tactics fit with their subordinates' NfCC, subordinates are more likely to use constructive conflict management strategies, whereas a mismatch between these dimensions exacerbates the use of maladapted strategies.

Note

1. The NFC is a distinct construct from the desire for control. The former refers to an epistemic motivation involved in the formation of judgments (subjective knowledge), whereas the latter pertains to the striving for social dominance.

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Appendix. Interpersonal power inventory

"Harsh" strategies

Reward/impersonal power: "My supervisor reminds me that he/she can help me to get a promotion".

Reward/personal power: "My supervisor reminds me that I would receive his/her approval if I comply".

Coercive/impersonal power: "My supervisor reminds me that he/she can make it more difficult for me to get a promotion".

Coercive/personal power: "My supervisor reminds me that I would receive his/her disapproval if I do not comply".

Legitimate/position power: "My supervisor reminds me that, as a subordinate, I have an obligation to do as he/she says".

Legitimate/equity: "My supervisor reminds me that I have made some mistakes and therefore I owed one to him/her".

Legitimate/reciprocity: "My supervisor reminds me that, for past considerations I received, I should feel obliged to comply".

"Soft" strategies

Legitimate/dependence: "My supervisor reminds me that he/she needs assistance and cooperation from those working with him/her".

Referent power: "My supervisor reminds me that because we belong to the same group, I should acquiesce to his/her requests".

Expert power: "My supervisor reminds me that he/she probably knows the best way to do the job".
Informational power: "My supervisor reminds me that there are good reasons to change my approach to the job".
Note: The IPI had three items for each power strategy. Listed above is one representative item for each. A copy of the complete instrument, in English or Italian, may be obtained from the authors.

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